

## THE PARABLE OF THE MOUNTAIN TOP

A parable of the mountain, the market, and the living proof  
by DOW

Now there was a mountain set before the people, and at its crown there was a Spring whose water was the brightest and purest blue. And men called it by many names: Living Water, and Grail Water; and they said it was holy. And it had healing in it; for wounds closed more readily, and fevered faces cooled, and the weary stood straighter. And some compared it to the fountain of youth, for those who drank deeply seemed to lose years from their faces, and their eyes grew clear as if dawn had returned.

Yet the glow did not remain forever, and men returned for more; and thus the market fed upon miracles.

And at the foot of the mountain there was a market, and its stalls were many. And the market had scales and measures. And men weighed Living Water as though it were coin, and they cried, "Summit-certified!" and they priced it by drops. And they sold holiness by the drop, with the water they carried down.

And you sold life like merchandise, and called it worship.

And those who returned with full pouches were greeted as blessed, and those who returned empty were treated as warnings. And the saying in the stalls was this: "Bring me Living Water, or bring me ore from the deep—either way, bring me proof I can price."

Wherefore the ultimate goal among the climbers became this: to return with as much Living Water as possible. For they said one to another, "If we but bring enough, the Lord must let us in." And because the water was scarce and costly, they learned stinginess as a virtue and called it prudence.

For every drop given away was a drop that might have bought their entrance. And the people taught one another, saying, "God resideth at the mountain-top." And they spoke as though height were righteousness, and as though the Spring were a throne.

And they taught one another another saying also: "Suffering is holiness." Wherefore some preferred pain to mercy, for pain could be displayed, and mercy must be shared.

And it came to pass that sometimes the Lord walked among them in plainness, with rope upon His shoulder; and they saw Him upon the trails and supposed He climbed to dwell above—not perceiving He descended to carry.

Now the Lord walked the mountain indeed; yet the people were many, and the stranded multiplied. And He would not force the unwilling, for mercy without consent becomes custody. Wherefore He commanded them, "Bring living proof, and do as I do," that His hands might be many—else the mountain would remain as it is, and men would call waiting faith.

## PROLOGUE

## THE MOUNTAIN

## THE GRAIL SPRING

Draft in progress — compiled master document

Prologue

Of the Seven, and the Beggar at the Gate

And it came to pass in the days of a great dryness—when men spoke much of holiness and little of mercy—that there went abroad a rumor among the people concerning a mountain that stood apart from other mountains, solitary and high. And they called it by many names, according to their desires: some called it The Mount of Witness, for they sought a sign; others called it The Mount of Purity, for they sought to be clean; and others called it The Mount of Judgment, for they desired to be proved above their brethren.

Now upon the crown of that mountain there was said to be a spring, and it was the only spring upon the whole ascent; for the mountain was bare, and its bones were stone, and its breath was wind, and its tongue was dust. And there were no streams in its valleys, neither pools in its folds; and the snow that sometimes rested upon its shoulders was not to be trusted, for it came and departed in the same day. Wherefore the saying became common among those who knew the trails: There is one water, and it is at the top.

for though the mountain doth not forbid a second climbing, hunger and praise do; for a man who returned empty was shamed, and a man without goods could not buy another ascent

Wherefore the seven had prepared their pouches with careful measure. For each carried enough water for the days of ascent and descent, and one day more, that they might endure delay or hardship; and beyond that there was no reserve. And every mouthful taken early would be asked for later, for it was the only Spring.

And because men love what cannot be had without cost, they gave that spring a holy name, calling it the Grail, and speaking of it as though it were a cup and not a water. And there arose among the people a manner of speech, saying: He that drinketh thereof shall be clean; he that bringeth thereof shall be approved. And many desired it, not that the thirsty might drink, but that their mouths might say, Behold.

And there were seven who came together in those days to make the ascent. The first was a man of hard eyes and straight back, and his words were few. He had been set over others in times past, and his voice had weighed like iron in a room. He loved order, and he loved obedience, and he feared disorder as other men fear plague. And he called his fear discipline, and he called his discipline love. Wherefore among his people he was known as a magistrate, though he wore no robe when he traveled.

The second was a man practiced in gentleness, and his gentleness had a blade in it. He spoke of mercy often, and yet his mercy moved always through gates. He loved the turning of keys, not for theft, but for steadiness; and he believed that peace came by channels and forms, and by proper hands laid upon proper heads. Wherefore many sought him when their consciences burned, and he had learned to calm them—sometimes by healing, and sometimes by sealing.

The third was a keeper of boundaries. He had watched his people be thinned by

hunger and scattered by violence; and he had learned to cherish identity as a lamp in a storm. His words were careful; his love was fierce; his memory was long. He carried within him a law that had preserved him, and he feared the soft erosion of that law more than he feared the knife. Wherefore he measured holiness in fidelity, and he measured danger in mixture.

The fourth was a preacher, swift of tongue and bright of mind. He had a way of lifting his chin when he spoke, as though truth itself were rising in his throat. He despised hypocrisy, and yet he did not know that despising can become its own form of pride. He loved the clean edge of doctrine and the straight line of reason; and he believed that if words were set in right order, souls would follow. Wherefore he called belief a foundation and called doubt a rot, and he feared compassion that might loosen the spine of truth.

The fifth was a clerk, not because he loved papers, but because he had been trained in worthiness. He had lived in a world where doors were opened by questions and closed by answers; where belonging was measured by interviews; where the clean were admitted and the unclean were helped from a distance. He did not think of himself as cruel. He thought of himself as careful. He believed the holy must be protected, and he believed that protection required gates. Wherefore he carried in his mind an invisible list—of requirements, and exceptions, and warnings.

The sixth was an auditor, though he wore no badge. He spoke often of outcomes, and he loved charts and thresholds. He did not seek holiness as a burning, but as a proof. He believed that care which could not be measured could not be trusted, and that mercy which could not be managed would become chaos. He feared waste; he feared fraud; he feared harm by negligence; and he did not perceive that fear itself can build a throne. Wherefore he took comfort in procedures and called them safety.

The seventh was a man not used to authority, and his shoulders bore no rank. His hands had been empty too often, and he had learned the taste of being left out. He had been spoken against, not for crimes, but for weakness; not for malice, but for failing. And the knowledge of his failing had entered into his bones, so that he carried shame as another man carries a pack. He was hungry for God, yet he did not know what God was; and he was weary of being promised holiness and receiving only hunger. Wherefore he walked with the others, but he did not belong to them; and though he said little, his heart spoke constantly: If I drink, will I finally be real?

Now these seven gathered at the base of the mountain at dawn. And the air was cold there, and the shadow lay long. And they examined their packs and tightened their straps and counted their provisions. Each had a pouch for water, and each pouch was strong; and the straps were stitched, and the mouths were tied, and the skins were new. And they spoke among themselves of the trail, and of the ridge, and of the hard stretch above the tree line. And they spoke also, each in his own manner, of the Spring.

The magistrate said, "We will not turn aside."

The confessor said, "We will keep peace among us."

The boundary-keeper said, "We will not be defiled."

The preacher said, "We will not be deceived."

The clerk said, "We will be worthy."

The auditor said, "We will be efficient."

But the seventh said nothing, for he had learned that a man may speak vows and still be empty; and he feared the emptiness in him more than he feared the mountain.

And as they prepared to set their feet upon the path, there sat by the trail a beggar.

His clothes were thin, and his knees showed through the cloth; and his hands trembled, not from age, but from thirst. His lips were cracked, and the skin about his mouth was split. And he held a cup that had once been bright but was now dull, and the cup was empty. And he lifted his eyes to them as they passed, and he said, "Sirs."

And they looked upon him, and they saw him; and because they were not beasts, each felt a small pull within himself, as though a thread had been tugged.

Yet each also felt the weight of the climb, and the dryness of the mountain in their imagination, and the long descent that must be made afterward.

And the beggar said, "I would go also. I have heard the rumor of the Spring. But I have no water. Give me enough that I might make the journey."

For he had heard that the water of the summit could buy bread in the market, and could buy praise among the clean; and he desired both, for hunger and shame are near kin.

And some spoke also of ore and bright stones brought from fissures, saying, "This is the deeper proof," and the market loved any proof it could price.

And the beggar said also, "If I can but reach the Spring, then I will be counted. Give me enough to climb, that I may find proof with my own hands."

Now when he said enough, he did not mean much; for his cup was small, and his throat was narrow. He meant only that he might live. He meant only that he might walk.

And the magistrate looked upon him and said, "The mountain is not for the unprepared."

And the beggar said, "Then prepare me."

But the magistrate had already turned his eyes away, for he feared that if he yielded once, he would yield again; and he called that fear strength.

And the confessor looked upon him and said, "If we give, we may not have sufficient for the descent. It would not be wise."

And the beggar said, "Then be wise for me also."

But the confessor pressed his lips together, for he had learned that wisdom can become a wall; and he called the wall prudence.

And the boundary-keeper looked upon him and said, "If we aid you, we invite others. And the trail will be crowded, and the Spring will be profaned."

And the beggar said, "Is a spring profaned by thirst?"

But the boundary-keeper clenched his jaw, for he had learned to protect a people by saying no; and he called his no covenant.

And the preacher looked upon him and said, "God helps those who seek Him. If you would go, then go. But do not ask me to weaken my witness."

And the beggar said, "Is a witness weakened by mercy?"

But the preacher frowned, for his mind loved clean categories; and he called

his refusal truth.

And the clerk looked upon him and said, "There are ways. There are programs. There are proper channels. If you were meant to go, you would have been given what you needed."

And the beggar said, "I was given this cup."

But the clerk shook his head, for he had learned to confuse permission with goodness; and he called permission righteousness.

And the auditor looked upon him and said, "If we give you water and you fail, then our water has been wasted. We must steward what we carry."

And the beggar said, "Is mercy waste when it fails?"

But the auditor's eyes hardened, for he had learned to trust only what can be predicted; and he called prediction care.

Then the seventh came last, and his feet slowed without his willing. For he saw in the beggar a thing familiar: the request that is simple, and the refusal that is polished. He felt again the old ache of being left wanting.

And his hand moved toward his pouch, and his fingers touched the cord.

But he also felt the eyes of the six upon him, and he desired—like all men desire—to be counted among the clean. And he remembered every time he had been called unworthy, and every time he had tried to be good and had been told it was not enough. And the hunger in him rose up, saying: If you give now, you will not make it. If you give now, you will not be approved. If you give now, you will remain what you are.

And he withdrew his hand, and he passed by.

And as he passed, the beggar looked upon him, and the beggar did not curse him. He only said, "Then I will remain."

And the seventh's throat tightened, and he hated himself in that moment; yet he did not turn back.

And thus the seven began the ascent.

Now as they climbed, the sun rose, and the shadow fled. And the trail narrowed, and the rocks grew sharp. And the air became dry, and their breaths became loud. And the mountain did not speak in words, but it spoke in thirst.

And it came to pass as they went, each told himself a story.

The magistrate said within himself, A man must learn to stand. And if he cannot stand, he must be taught.

The confessor said within himself, Mercy must not be reckless. A channel preserves the flood.

The boundary-keeper said within himself, If I yield, my people dissolve.

The preacher said within himself, If truth bends for pity, it breaks.

The clerk said within himself, The holy requires gates.

The auditor said within himself, Care that cannot be measured becomes harm.

But the seventh said within himself, If the Grail makes me whole, then I will endure anything. If the Grail fills me, then I will finally be clean.

And it came to pass also that their good reasons comforted them; for good reasons are warm at the beginning. But the mountain is long, and warmth does not remain.

And they climbed until their tongues were dry, and their legs burned, and the sky above them widened like a judgment.

And it was the only Spring.  
And they went up clean.

## Chapter 1

### The First Thirst

And it came to pass that on the first day they rose above the last trees, and the air changed. For below, the wind moved among branches and carried smells of earth; but above, the wind moved naked, and it carried only dust and cold. And the trail became a spine of stone, and the slope did not forgive. And the sun was bright and without kindness, and though it gave light, it gave no mercy; for mercy is not light, but water.

Now the seven had planned their ascent, each according to his own wisdom. They had spoken of distances and of time, and they had measured their pouches and their mouths. And because men love to feel prepared, they were satisfied with their counting.

Yet the mountain laughed at counting, though it did not laugh with sound. It laughed by making the air thinner and the stone steeper. It laughed by making their steps shorter. It laughed by taking one hour and stretching it into two.

And by the middle of the day their throats were sore.

And the magistrate said, "We will keep pace. We will not linger."

And the confessor said, "We will not quarrel over small things."

And the boundary-keeper said, "We will not mingle our provisions."

And the preacher said, "We will not weaken."

And the clerk said, "We will not compromise standards."

And the auditor said, "We will not waste."

But the seventh walked behind them, not by choice, but because his lungs were weaker, and because shame makes a man cautious, and because he did not trust his own right to take space.

Now after a time the trail bent, and they came upon a place where the rock had fallen away into a shallow bowl. And in that bowl there sat a child, no more than twelve years, with a bundle of sticks beside him and a bruise upon his cheek.

And the child's eyes were bright not only with fear, but with hunger for proof. For he had heard of the House and of the mountain, and he thought within himself, If I can but climb, I will be counted.

And the child looked up when he heard their steps, and his eyes were bright from hunger or fear; and he said nothing at first, for he had learned that strangers are sometimes kind and sometimes cruel.

And the confessor slowed, and his face softened, and he said, "What doest thou here?"

And the child said, "My mother is below. She is sick, and I went to find wood, and then the wind changed. I cannot find the way."

Now the bowl was sheltered from the wind, and it would have been an easy place to rest. And the child's mouth was dry, and his lips were pale.

And the seventh looked upon the child, and his stomach tightened; for he remembered being lost—not upon a mountain, but among men. And he waited for

someone to offer water, for he desired to see it, as a man desires to see the world proved good.

But the magistrate said, "The child is not our matter; we have a higher journey."

And another said, "If we stop for every one, we will never reach proof." And

another said, "He should return and learn preparedness." And another said,

"If we give water now, we risk shame later." And they added a holy cover,

saying, "The Lord walketh these trails; He will find him."

And the preacher said, "We are not sent for every lost one. We have a higher journey."

And the boundary-keeper said, "He may be bait."

And the clerk said, "If he belongs below, then below he should be."

And the auditor said, "If we stop, we lose time. If we lose time, we lose water. If we lose water, we lose life."

Then the confessor looked at the child again, and the confessor's hands moved as though he would help; but his eyes flicked to the others, and he saw their faces set like stone. And he withdrew his hands, and he said softly, "May God guide thee."

And the seventh, hearing his own conscience, said softly to the child, "Come

down with us to the last trees, and thou shalt live." But the child shook

his head and said, "If I go down, I go down as failure. I must find the way

myself, that I may be worthy." And the seventh felt sickness, for he

perceived how shame had entered even a child and called itself agency.

And they passed on.

And the child watched them go, and he did not cry out; for even a child can sense when mercy has become a performance.

And as they climbed higher, the seventh's breath grew ragged, and his mouth became bitter. And he said within himself, This is the same.

And the mountain answered him, not with a voice, but with a tightening in his chest.

Now in the afternoon the wind rose. And the wind was not cool like mercy; it was sharp like judgment. It cut the lips and stole the moisture from the tongue. And the sun did not soften, but burned behind the wind as though it desired to consume them twice.

And the clerk called for a brief rest, not because he felt pity, but because he had read of altitude and knew the body's limits. For even a man of gates must sometimes consider flesh.

And they sat upon stones, and they loosened their straps. And the auditor took out his measure, and he looked at their pouches and at the line of water that remained in each. And he said, "We must ration."

For each ascent was a budgeted run: water at the bottom, and water at the top, and little between. And if a man spent his portion to appear merciful, yet returned without value, he might not afford to climb again.

Now rationing is a word that sounds like wisdom, and sometimes it is. Yet in the mouths of men who love control, it becomes a throne.

And the auditor said, "Each will drink by the measure. And none will drink beyond what is allotted, lest we endanger the whole."

And the magistrate nodded, for he loved rule.  
And the boundary-keeper nodded, for he loved separation.  
And the preacher nodded, for he loved discipline.  
And the clerk nodded, for he loved standards.  
But the seventh did not nod. For he remembered how often he had been told that he was the reason the whole was endangered. He remembered how rules are made to feel fair, and then used to punish the one who is already behind.  
And he said, though his voice was low, “What if one’s lungs burn more? What if one needs more?”  
And the auditor looked upon him and said, “Need is endless. If we feed need, we die.”  
And the seventh’s cheeks flushed, not from heat but from old humiliation. And he said nothing further.  
And the auditor measured, and each drank his portion. And when the seventh lifted his pouch to drink, he felt the smallness of the portion, and he felt the eyes of the others upon him as though they were watching to see if he would take more than his due.  
And he swallowed, and the water did not comfort him. It only reminded him that there was not enough.  
And the mountain answered him again with thirst.  
Now as they rose to depart, there came upon them another traveler from below—an old man with a pack slung uneven and a limp in his right leg. And the old man’s face was gray, and his eyes were bloodshot from wind, and he looked upon them as one who sees water in another’s hand.  
And the old man said, “Sirs, have ye water?”  
And the magistrate said, “We have enough for our own.”  
And the old man said, “I ask not for all. I ask for a mouthful. My tongue cleaveth.”  
And the preacher said, “The mountain is a test. Endure.”  
And the old man said, “Is endurance holiness when a cup is near?”  
And the boundary-keeper said, “If we give, we invite a line.”  
And the old man looked behind him, and there was no line. There was only stone and wind and emptiness.  
And the clerk said, “If you have come, you should have carried.”  
And the old man lifted his broken strap and said, “I carried until it broke.”  
And the old man said also, “I can yet turn back—if I turn back with proof. But if I go down empty, they will scorn me, and call my turning cowardice. Therefore I sit between thirst and shame.”  
And it came to pass that a man passed by them upon the trail, carrying a coil of rope, and His pace was steady and His eyes were kind. And He asked the old man, “Why sittest thou?” And the old man said, “I wait for proof.” And the man answered, “Then rise, and walk with the living. Bring living proof, and do as I do.” And having said it, He went on, not upward to glory, but downward toward the weak.  
And it came to pass that farther along the trail there sat a woman alone beneath an overhang, her knees drawn to her chest, and her pouch lay beside

her like a dead thing, split and dry. And her lips were cracked, and her eyes were fixed upward, as though the summit were a judge that could yet be persuaded.

And the Lord came upon her in plainness, and the rope upon His shoulder was worn from carrying. And He did not ask first for her record, nor for her reason, but He said, "Daughter, come with Me, and I will give thee rest."

But the woman shook her head quickly, and fear moved in her like a sermon.

And she said, "I cannot. I have nothing. I have no proof. If I go down as I am, they will turn me away from the House, and they will say I was unworthy."

And the Lord said, "Thy proof is upon the mountain."

And the woman's eyes flashed, and she pointed upward and said, "Then I must go. I must reach the Spring. I must return with living proof. Else I am nothing."

And the Lord answered her in few words, for His answers were simple: "Bring living proof, and do as I do."

And she said, "How shall I do as Thou doest? Thou art the Lord. Thou hast strength. I am broken."

And the Lord stooped and lifted her torn pouch, and He held it up where the seam had failed, and He said, "Thou art not broken because thou hast failed to climb. Thou art broken because thou hast believed the lie that suffering is proof."

And the Living Water remained in their hands, and it did not open the gate. For the gate was not purchased by miracles, but by mercy.

And the woman trembled, for the lie was dear to her; it had given her a reason to stay. And she said, "If I endure a little more, if I suffer a little more, then I will be worthy."

And the Lord said, "Come home."

For His House is a gate in the world, but home is rest in Him.

But she drew back as though home were shame. And she said, "Not yet. Not until I have earned it. Not until I have reached the summit and returned with proof."

And the Lord looked upon her, and His eyes were sorrowful. And He said, "Then thou wilt remain upon the mountain, though the House is near."

And He offered His hand again; and she did not take it.

And the Lord turned, not upward, but downward, for His work was with the stranded; and as He went, He carried one more empty pouch, as a witness against the mountain's lie.

And the auditor said, "We cannot risk the group."

And one among them added, "The Rescue patrol passeth the lower ridge at sundown. If thou endure till then, thou wilt be gathered."

Then the seventh felt again that pull within him, that tugging thread. For the old man's strap was broken as the summit man's would later be broken, though they knew it not. And the seventh thought, This is the mountain showing us the end at the beginning.

And his hand moved toward his pouch.

But the magistrate's voice came like a nail: "We go."

And the seventh's hand stopped.

And the old man's eyes fell upon the seventh, and the old man said quietly, "You know."

And the seventh's heart struck him as with a stone; for it is one thing to refuse with pride, and another to refuse with recognition.

And they went on.

Now the trail narrowed into switchbacks, and the rocks fell away to one side into a deep space where sound did not return. And the wind was stronger there, and it pushed at them as though it desired to turn them back.

And in that place the Split One began to speak much.

For he walked near the magistrate, and he said, "We must keep moving, else we perish."

And he walked near the confessor, and he said, "We must show mercy, else we are not men."

And he walked near the auditor, and he said, "We must be prudent, else we are fools."

And he walked near the seventh, and he said, "We will help later. Later is still help."

And as he spoke, he wrung his hands and chewed the inside of his cheek, and his eyes darted as though searching for a door where there was no door.

And the seventh said, "Later is a word that costs others."

But the Split One laughed a thin laugh and said, "All words cost. Choose the cheaper."

And the seventh looked upon him and saw that the man was already divided, and the division was not a philosophy, but a wound.

Now near evening they came to a ridge where the trail passed between two stones that stood like witnesses. And beyond those stones the world fell away, and the valleys below were small as wrinkles. And the sun hung low, and the sky was red.

And there the seven halted, for their legs were trembling, and their mouths were dry, and their eyes stung. And the confessor said, "Let us rest."

And the magistrate, seeing their weakness, allowed it, for even an iron man knows that flesh will rebel if pressed too far.

And they sat, and they did not speak much, for thirst makes speech costly.

Then the seventh lifted his eyes, and he saw, far below upon the trail, a small figure moving—perhaps the child, perhaps the old man, perhaps the base beggar trying to climb with an empty cup. And he could not tell which, for distance makes men into symbols.

And he felt a grief rise in him, and the grief was not only for them, but for himself; for he began to see that the mountain was not merely a climb, but a mirror. And he feared what the mirror would show at the top.

And he said within himself, If I drink and feel holy, and yet I remain this—what then?

And the mountain did not answer with words, but with silence. For some questions are answered only by the end.

And it came to pass that as night fell, they lay among stones. And each guarded his pouch as though it were life. And the seventh lay awake longer than the others, hearing the wind and the small sounds of men sleeping.

And he remembered the beggar at the base. And he remembered his own hand touching the cord and withdrawing. And he whispered into the dark, not a prayer of triumph, but a prayer of hunger: "If Thou art God, be different than this."

And in the night his mouth was dry.

And it was the only Spring.

And thus ended the first day of their ascent.

Chapter 2

The Pack Court

And it came to pass on the second day that the wind slept for a little season, and the sun rose clear; and because the air was still, the seven supposed within themselves that the mountain had grown gentle.

## **Chapter — The Tiny Stream**

And it came to pass that upon a ledge that was neither high enough for the Spring nor low enough for the market, there was a cleft in the rock where a tiny stream ran—no wider than a finger, no louder than a whisper. It trickled from some hidden seam and vanished again into stone.

For his stream was not blue, and it did not make him young; therefore men called it nothing.

And beside that trickle sat a man alone, for he had been stranded there many days. His ankle had turned upon the scree, and he could not descend without a rope. Yet he could not climb, for the ledge was narrow and the wind was cruel, and his strength had been spent in waiting.

Now the stream kept him alive. It wet his lips. It spared him the last death of thirst. Yet it did not save him, for it could not carry him down, and it could not carry anyone with him.

And when travelers passed and saw the trickle, their faces tightened. For they had no stream, and scarcity makes men judges.

And the man lifted his hand and said, "Sirs—have ye rope? Have ye company? Help me down."

But they looked at the trickle and said, "Thou hast enough."

And another said, "Others have none. We cannot waste rescue on one who is supplied."

And another said, "If we help thee, we must help all. Endure till the Lord come."

For they spoke as though the Lord were a schedule, and not a call.

And they called their refusal fairness, and their passing-by wisdom.

Now the man cried after them, "It is not water I lack. It is a way."

But the travelers heard only their own shortage. And they left him with his trickle and their judgment.

And thus the tiny stream became his prison. For because he had enough to live, he was counted as not needy; and because he had not enough to travel, he remained stranded. And he sat in a holiness men could envy, and an isolation no man would share.

And it came to pass that even those who were stranded elsewhere spoke bitterly of him, saying, "If he hath a stream, let him be grateful." And

gratitude was used as a gag.

Wherefore the man began to doubt his own pain. For when the world tells thee thou hast enough, thou startest to punish thyself for wanting more than survival.

And one night as the wind cut and the stars were cold eyes, the man whispered, "Perhaps my loneliness is my proof. Perhaps my suffering is holiness."

And at that saying, the mountain's lie entered him.

And it came to pass that in the morning the Lord walked the ledge in plainness, with rope upon His shoulder and dust upon His feet. And He knelt by the trickle as though it were not treasure, and He looked upon the man and said, "Come with Me, and I will give thee rest."

But the man drew back and said, "They say I have enough. They say I do not qualify. If I ask again, they will scorn me."

And the Lord said, "Enough to live is not enough to belong."

And the man trembled, for he had not heard belonging spoken as mercy.

And the Lord said, "Bring living proof, and do as I do."

And the man whispered, "What proof have I? I sit alone with a trickle that no one else hath."

And the Lord answered, "Thy proof is not the stream, but the hand that would share it."

And the Lord took the rope and bound it fast, and He set the man's arm upon His shoulder, and He began to walk downward.

And as they descended, the man looked back at the ledge and understood: his tiny stream had never been blessing if it could not be carried; it had been bait for judgment. And he wept, not because he left water behind, but because he left the lie behind.

And the Lord went on, carrying him toward the bottom, toward the House, where rest was not purchased by shortage, but given by mercy.

Yet the mountain had not grown gentle; it had only grown silent. For a silent judge is not a merciful judge, and a quiet hardship is often a deeper hardship; because a man cannot blame the wind when his own body fails.

And the seven rose from among the stones where they had lain, and their joints were stiff, and their tongues were rough, and their bellies were hollow. And each reached first for his water-pouch before he reached for bread; for thirst rules hunger when the air is thin.

And the auditor said, "We will keep the measure this day also. We will drink by the portion, as we did yesterday, lest the eager consume the cautious."

Now when he said the eager, his eyes passed over the seventh and did not remain; yet the seventh felt the sting as a man feels a thorn through cloth.

For a man may be accused without being named, and the accusation still enters him.

And they set their faces upward.

Now the trail climbed along a shelf, and the shelf was narrow, and the rock above leaned out as though it would press them back into the valley. And in that place their packs began to matter. For below, a man can carry much and still walk; but above, every pound is a voice, and it speaks against the

lungs.

And it came to pass the boundary-keeper's strap tore.

He had bound his pack carefully, and he had inspected it in the morning, and he had been proud of his readiness. Yet the stone does not honor pride, and the cord does not keep covenant with a man's confidence. The strap tore with a sound like cloth ripping in a quiet room, and his pack slid and pulled at his shoulder.

And he stumbled, and the cliff's emptiness yawned beside him.

Then the magistrate reached and seized him by the upper arm, and drew him back; and the boundary-keeper's face turned pale, not from fear only, but from the sudden knowledge that a small failure may become a fall.

And the magistrate said, "Stand."

And the boundary-keeper stood, and the pack hung crooked, and his breath came short.

And the auditor said, "We must stop and decide."

Now when men are afraid, they love councils; for councils make fear feel orderly. And the seven gathered about the torn strap as though it were a wound. And the boundary-keeper sat upon a stone, holding his shoulder, and his eyes were down.

And the clerk said, "We cannot carry his pack for him. Each man is accountable for his own load."

And the confessor said, "Yet if we leave him, we lose him."

And the preacher said, "Then let him repent of poor preparation."

And the boundary-keeper lifted his eyes at that, and anger flashed; for he had prepared, and he knew it; and he hated the way men call misfortune sin.

And the auditor said, "We will not argue in the wind. We will decide by fairness."

And the magistrate said, "Speak, then."

And the auditor began to speak as one reading a statute. He said, "We will redistribute weight. Each will take a portion of his pack, that the group may continue."

Now redistribution is a holy word in the mouths of the hungry; yet it becomes a cruel word when it is measured by pride. For the measure of a burden is not in pounds only, but in lungs and bones and heart.

And the auditor said, "We will do it evenly."

And the seventh said softly, "Even is not the same as equal."

And the auditor looked upon him and said, "If we make exceptions, we make resentment. Resentment breaks groups. Groups die here."

And the magistrate nodded again, for he loved what was straight.

And the clerk nodded, for he loved what was consistent.

And the preacher nodded, for he loved what was severe.

Then the confessor looked at the seventh, and the confessor's eyes pleaded for peace. And the seventh swallowed his words, for he had been punished for speaking before.

And it came to pass that the boundary-keeper's pack was opened, and his things were divided. And some took food, and some took rope, and some took cloth. And the magistrate took the heaviest bundle, not from mercy, but from

pride; for pride can mimic strength, and strength can mimic love.  
And the auditor measured again, and he gave to each according to his judgment. And to the seventh he gave a portion.  
And the seventh took it, and his hands shook a little, not from cold only. For it is a strange thing to be told that burdens will be shared, and then to be given another man's burden when thy own lungs are already burning.  
And the seventh looked upon the boundary-keeper and felt a small bitterness, and he hated the bitterness; for he knew that bitterness is born when mercy is done without wisdom.  
And they rose to continue.  
Now as they climbed, the seventh's steps grew slower. Not because he desired to linger, but because his chest tightened, and his legs trembled, and the extra weight pulled at him like shame's hand.  
And the magistrate looked back and saw him lagging, and he said, "Keep up."  
And the seventh said, "I am."  
But he was not. And the truth of not being able to keep up is a truth that shames a man even when he has done no wrong.  
Then the preacher said, "If a man cannot endure, he should not have come."  
And the seventh's mouth tasted iron, and he did not answer. For the preacher spoke as though endurance were righteousness; and the seventh knew endurance, and he also knew that endurance is sometimes only survival under cruelty.  
And it came to pass that at noon they came upon a place where the trail widened, and there was a cairn of stones, and beside it lay a bundle of cloth. And within the cloth there was bread, hard as rock, and a small skin of water, empty.  
And the auditor said, "This is waste. Someone carried and discarded."  
And the confessor touched the cloth and said, "Or someone laid it for another and never returned."  
And the boundary-keeper said, "It may be a trap."  
And the clerk said, "It is not ours."  
But the seventh saw the emptiness of the skin, and he thought of the beggar's cup. And he thought of how men call offerings waste when they are not the ones who needed them.  
And the seventh said, "Someone hoped."  
And the magistrate said, "Hope does not fill pouches."  
And they went on.  
Now in the afternoon the air thinned further, and the sun's light seemed to press down like a hand. And the seventh began to see spots at the edge of his sight. And he feared the spots, for he had known that kind of fading before—when men speak of holiness and he feels himself disappear.  
Then the Split One came near him and whispered, "Do not look weak. Weakness invites law."  
And the seventh said, "Law is already here."  
And the Split One smiled without joy and said, "Then pretend."  
And thus the Split One taught him the first true lesson of the mountain: that men would rather pretend goodness than become good, because becoming costs.  
And it came to pass near evening that the boundary-keeper, whose pack had

been divided, began to falter. For though he carried less, his shoulder had been strained in the stumble, and pain shot through him. And he breathed as one who had swallowed dust.

And the confessor said, "We must stop."

But the auditor said, "We have already stopped. We cannot stop again."

And the boundary-keeper said through clenched teeth, "Continue."

Now the boundary-keeper spoke out of pride and fear. For it is hard for a man who protects others to admit that he himself needs protection.

And the seventh looked upon him and thought, This is what we do to one another: we turn need into shame.

And the seventh's grief grew.

And they came at last to a line of rock where the trail broke into two: one way climbed steeply upon loose shale, and the other wound longer along a ridge.

And the auditor said, "The longer way costs time. Time costs water."

And the preacher said, "Then faith chooses the steep."

And the magistrate said, "We take the steep."

And the confessor's eyes narrowed, for he saw the shale and knew that a misstep there would break bone. And he said, "Wisdom is also faith."

But the clerk said, "We did not come to be cautious. We came to be worthy."

And the Split One spoke both ways at once, saying, "If we die, we help none. If we delay, we fail the journey."

And his voice shook, and his hands fluttered like birds seeking a place to land.

And the seventh looked upon the two paths and felt a kind of dread. For he perceived that every decision on the mountain wore the same face: either you protect the vulnerable and risk losing the quest, or you protect the quest and lose the vulnerable.

And the magistrate stepped onto the shale, and the others followed.

And as they climbed, the shale slid under their feet like deceit. And stones rolled and hissed downward and were lost.

And the boundary-keeper stumbled again.

And this time the magistrate was not close enough to seize him.

And the boundary-keeper's knee struck the stone, and a crack sounded, and his cry was sharp and small. And he fell to one side and clutched his leg.

And the preacher said, "Get up."

And the boundary-keeper said, "I cannot."

And the auditor's face tightened, for injury is the enemy of schedules; and the clerk's mouth became a line, for injury is the enemy of worthiness; and the magistrate's jaw clenched, for injury is the enemy of command.

And the seventh moved toward the boundary-keeper.

But the magistrate lifted his hand and said, "Stop. We decide."

And they gathered again, and the wind began to wake, and the sun began to drop, and the cold came early at that height.

And the auditor said, "We must lighten. We cannot carry all and carry him."

And the clerk said, "He must be responsible for his own outcome."

And the preacher said, "The mountain reveals the unfit."

And the confessor said, "He is not unfit. He is wounded."  
And the boundary-keeper, sweating with pain, whispered, "Leave me."  
Now when a man says leave me, it may sound like bravery; but often it is only shame wearing a brave mask.  
And the seventh saw it, and something in him broke—not fully, but as a thread breaks when it has been pulled too long.  
And he said, "We are not going to leave him."  
And the magistrate looked upon him as though he had spoken treason.  
And the magistrate said, "If you will not obey, you will endanger all."  
And the seventh said, "Then perhaps all is wrong."  
And there was silence, and the wind returned.  
And the Split One began to whisper quickly, "We can do both. We can do both. We can help and still make it. We can help later. We can carry him partway. We can—"  
But his words tangled, and he choked, and his eyes went wet, and he laughed again that thin laugh.  
And the auditor said, "We will do this: two will take turns bearing him. The rest will take his remaining burden. And we will reduce portions tonight."  
And the confessor agreed, for it saved life, though by a cold measure.  
And the magistrate agreed, for it preserved command.  
And the clerk agreed, for it preserved progress.  
And the preacher agreed, for it preserved severity, for severity loves any plan that hurts.  
And the seventh agreed, because a man who is not used to authority learns quickly that refusal costs more than obedience—until a day comes when he can no longer pay.  
And they lifted the boundary-keeper between them, and they climbed into the evening, slower now, and the mountain's teeth showed.  
And when they lay down among the stones that night, the seventh did not sleep easily. For he had seen that "fairness" can become a weapon, and that policies are often made to protect the strong from the weak.  
And he remembered the beggar at the base, and he whispered again into the dark, "If Thou art God, be different than this."  
And his mouth was dry.  
And it was the only Spring.  
And thus ended the second day.

### Chapter 3

#### The Good Reason

And it came to pass on the third day that the boundary-keeper could not walk without the help of another, for his knee had swollen, and the color of it was dark beneath the skin. And he gritted his teeth and called it endurance, but the mountain called it injury, which is a plainer word.  
And the magistrate appointed the bearing of him as though it were labor in a field. He said, "Two at a time. Change every hour. No complaint."  
And the clerk made a record of it in his mind, as though the mind were a ledger: who carried, how long, what was owed. For a man of gates loves accounting.

And the auditor watched the pouches and made his measure stricter.  
And the preacher spoke a short sermon at dawn, saying, "The mountain cleans by fire. Let each be proven."  
And the confessor said, "Let each be preserved."  
But the seventh said nothing. For the seventh had begun to be afraid of his own thoughts. He had begun to see that the quest was not a test of strength, but a test of love; and he feared that he had no love in him, only hunger.  
Now that day the sky was white, and the sun was hidden behind thin cloud. And because the light was muted, the men supposed again that mercy had come. Yet the air remained dry, and the dryness is a slow knife.  
And it came to pass that near the middle of the day they came to a place where the trail passed beneath a wall of stone. And the wall rose high, and the stone above leaned outward like a brow; and beneath it there ran a narrow ledge, and on the ledge there were marks, as of old feet, and scratches, as of old hands. For many had passed there, and many had slipped, and the stone remembers.  
And the auditor halted and said, "We must choose our timing. If we are slow, night will catch us in the open. If we are swift, we can reach a shelf beyond where we may sleep."  
Now the shelf beyond was spoken of by those who knew the mountain. Some called it a mercy, and some called it a trap. For it was sheltered, but it was high, and the wind could be cruel there.  
And the confessor said, "We must not rush with the wounded."  
And the preacher said, "The wounded must not rule the pace."  
And the clerk said, "Our worthiness is not in comfort."  
And the boundary-keeper, being carried, whispered, "Go. Do not slow."  
Now again shame put its hand upon the group.  
And the Split One began to murmur, "If we delay, we endanger all. If we hurry, we endanger him. If we—" and his murmuring became like prayer, yet without God in it.  
And the magistrate said, "We go."  
And they moved.  
Now as they passed beneath that wall, the ledge narrowed. And the drop beside it was deep, and sound fell into it and did not return. And the seventh, bearing part of the boundary-keeper's weight, felt his foot search for purchase again and again on loose grit. And he smelled fear like a metal in his mouth.  
And the boundary-keeper groaned, and the sound of it was swallowed by stone.  
And the auditor, going before, counted steps as though counting could keep a man from falling.  
Then it came to pass that a stone shifted.  
It was small, and it would have meant nothing on a plain. But on a ledge, small stones are judgments. The stone shifted under the seventh's foot, and his ankle rolled, and pain shot up his leg like lightning.  
And his arms tightened around the boundary-keeper, and for a moment he swayed toward the edge.  
And the magistrate reached back and seized his pack strap and pulled.

And the seventh was saved—not by holiness, but by another’s grip.  
And he breathed hard, and his eyes filled with water that was not water, and he hated that his eyes could make water when his pouch could not.  
And the magistrate said, “Watch thy feet.”  
And the seventh said, “I am watching.”  
But he was watching more than his feet. He was watching the way the mountain forced men to sacrifice the weak to preserve the strong. And he was watching the way all of them called it good.  
And when they reached the shelf beyond the wall, the boundary-keeper’s face was slick with sweat, and his lips were gray. And the confessor knelt and pressed his hand to the boundary-keeper’s forehead and whispered words of comfort.  
And the preacher stood apart and looked upward, as though upward itself were a witness.  
And the clerk examined the pouches, and he said, “We have spent more than planned.”  
And the auditor said, “Then we must tighten.”  
Now tightening is a small word, yet it is the seed of many evils. For when men grow afraid, they tighten rules, and they tighten mercy, and they tighten the circle, until only the strong remain; and then they call the remaining circle holy.  
And the auditor reduced the measure again.  
And the seventh’s mouth grew more bitter.  
Now as evening came upon them, the confessor spoke privately to the magistrate, saying, “If we continue thus, we will lose him.”  
Meaning the boundary-keeper.  
And the magistrate answered, “Then he should not have come.”  
And the confessor said, “He did not stumble from sin.”  
And the magistrate said, “The mountain does not care for excuses.”  
And the confessor turned away, and his face was pained; for he desired mercy, yet he desired unity more. And that desire is a hidden idol: peace at the cost of the weak.  
And the seventh saw it and grew colder.  
Now in the night the wind returned, and it struck their shelter and howled as a beast. And the stones were cold beneath them, and the boundary-keeper shivered with fever. And the seventh lay awake again, and his ankle throbbed. And he remembered the old man with the broken strap, and he remembered the child with the bundle of sticks, and he remembered the beggar at the base. And he began to understand that the mountain had set these before them as letters in a book, and they had not read.  
And he whispered again, “If Thou art God, be different than this.”  
And the mountain did not answer.  
And it came to pass near dawn that the boundary-keeper cried out softly, and the confessor woke and found him shaking.  
And the confessor said, “He needs water.”  
And the auditor said, “We all need water.”  
And the confessor said, “He will die.”

And the auditor said, "If we give now, we may all die."  
Now these words sounded like wisdom, and in them there was a kind of truth; for the mountain truly was without mercy. Yet there is a truth beyond such truth: that a life saved by refusing to save another is a life already wounded.  
And the seventh, hearing them, felt something in him twist.  
And he reached for his pouch.  
But he did not pour.  
For he feared. He feared the loss. He feared the look on the others' faces. He feared being called foolish, and he feared being left behind. For a man who has been left behind learns to fear being left behind as a man fears drowning.  
And he did not pour.  
And the boundary-keeper's shaking eased after a time, not because mercy came, but because the body grows numb when it cannot be helped.  
And the seventh hated himself again.  
Now on the fourth morning they set out, and the boundary-keeper could not bear weight. Wherefore two men carried him on a makeshift sling, and their progress became slow.  
And the auditor grew more severe, and his voice sharpened. And he said, "We must choose a line. If we keep carrying, we will arrive with empty pouches. Then what will we have proven?"  
And the preacher answered, "We will have proven that we were weak."  
And the confessor answered, "We will have proven that we were men."  
And the clerk answered, "We will have proven nothing, if we return without witness."  
And the Split One answered all at once, saying, "We must not be cruel. We must not be fools. We must not fail. We must not—" and his voice cracked, and he covered his mouth as though his own words were bile.  
And the magistrate said, "Enough."  
And the magistrate pointed to a bend above them where the trail again forked: one path climbed steeply along a narrow chimney of rock, and the other curved wide around a shoulder of the mountain.  
And the magistrate said, "The wide path is long. The steep is short. We take the steep."  
And the confessor said, "With the wounded?"  
And the magistrate said, "We do not negotiate with the mountain."  
Now the seventh looked upon the chimney and felt dread again. For he had rolled his ankle on the ledge, and he knew the feel of small failure turning into death.  
And he thought, If we do this, he will fall. If he falls, we will call it fate. If we call it fate, we will be clean in our own eyes.  
And the thought sickened him.  
And for the first time, he spoke aloud in a fuller voice, and his voice surprised even himself.  
He said, "If we take the steep, we kill him."  
And the auditor looked upon him and said, "You speak of killing as though

killing were a choice. The mountain kills. We only manage risk.”

And the seventh said, “Risk managed by sacrificing another is not management. It is altar-work.”

Then the preacher’s eyes flashed, and he said, “Do not accuse the faithful.”

And the seventh said, “I accuse the pattern.”

And the magistrate stepped toward him, and the magistrate’s shadow fell over him, and he said, “If you will not obey, you will not finish.”

And the seventh felt his old fear rise: the fear of being cast out, the fear of being left with no tribe, the fear of being alone. For he had climbed with them partly to belong, and he felt that desire now as a chain.

And the Split One seized upon the moment and cried, “We can do both! We can carry him up the steep. We can be worthy and merciful. We can—” and his words again tangled.

And the magistrate said, “Silence.”

And the group moved toward the steep, for men love the path that preserves their story.

And the seventh followed, for his courage had not yet outrun his hunger.

And as they lifted the boundary-keeper and began to climb, the boundary-keeper moaned, and his head lolled. And the chimney’s stone scraped their hands, and their knuckles bled. And the air grew thinner still, and their hearts hammered.

And the seventh, climbing, felt a strange thought settle in him like a stone: This journey is built to make us call harm good.

And because that thought was heavy, it sank and did not leave.

And the mountain remained dry.

And it was the only Spring.

And thus ended the third day.

#### Chapter 4

##### The Shelter Switchback

And it came to pass that after the chimney of stone, their hands were torn, and their breath was thin, and their progress became slow. For the boundary-keeper could not stand, and the seventh’s ankle had swollen, and the magistrate’s jaw had tightened into that hardness which is the beginning of cruelty.

And the auditor counted again, and his counting did not bring peace.

Now on that day the sky darkened in the afternoon, though it was not yet late. And clouds gathered upon the shoulder of the mountain like a cloak, and the wind returned with a different voice. For before it had been sharp like judgment; but now it was wet, and it carried cold, and it promised a storm.

And the confessor lifted his face and tasted the air, and he said, “We must find shelter.”

And the auditor answered, “Shelter costs time.”

And the confessor said, “Time costs nothing if we die.”

Then the preacher, who loved hardness, said, “Death is a cleansing.”

But the boundary-keeper, being borne, groaned, and the sound of him was not a sermon.

Now it came to pass that there was a place known among those who spoke of the mountain, and it was called by some the Switchback House, though it was not a house, but a hollow in the stone where a shelf jutted and a wall leaned over it. And in that hollow a man could lie without the full teeth of the wind; and some had lived there a night and some had not.

And the magistrate knew of it, and he said, "We will press to the hollow."

And they pressed.

And the storm pressed also.

For the wind came down sideways, and it carried needles of ice. And the stones grew slick beneath their feet, and the world became gray. And the seventh's breath became a rasp, and the seventh's fingers became stiff; and he feared not only death, but weakness in the sight of men, for weakness invites law.

And the Split One began to speak again, and his words were like a rope thrown into a river—catching nothing.

He said, "We must be careful, but we must not be slow. We must not be slow, but we must not be reckless. We must—"

And the magistrate said, "Silence, and walk."

And the Split One bit his tongue, and the blood of it tasted metallic in the cold.

Now as they came near the place of shelter, the trail bent sharply, and it descended a little, and then rose again, for the mountain loves to humble pride by making a man step down before he may step up. And because of this bending, they called it the switchback.

And there, beneath the leaning wall, they found that the hollow was not empty.

For within it there were people—poor families who had come from the low country to work in the quarries and to gather stone, and who had been caught upon the mountain when the weather turned. And they had made a small fire that did not burn much, for wood is rare above the trees; yet it made smoke, and the smoke clung under the rock. And there were blankets laid upon the stone, and there were two small children curled like kittens, and there was a woman with a scarf over her head, rocking another child who coughed.

And there were also those who climbed seeking not the House, but scraps and tokens to trade; and they called it pilgrimage.

And they were not climbing for trophies, but for bread, and the mountain had caught them as a snare.

And when the seven appeared in the mouth of the hollow, the woman looked up, and fear entered her eyes, for she had seen men with full packs before, and she had learned what full packs can demand.

And the children stared, and one of them held out his hands, not asking for water, but for warmth.

Now the confessor stepped forward as though his heart had been stirred; for the sight of children can pierce even a man of gates. And he said, "Peace be unto you."

But the magistrate looked upon the hollow, and he looked upon the storm outside, and his mind measured space like property.

And the auditor said quickly, "There is not room."

And the clerk said, "We must keep distance; we cannot risk sickness." And the preacher said, "They should not have climbed; let the mountain teach them." And the boundary-keeper said, "Do not mix; mixing defileth proof." And the auditor said, "If we share once, we must share always; therefore we share not at all." And they sealed their passing-by with faith, saying, "The Lord walketh the mountain; He will come for them."

And the clerk said, "We cannot risk sickness."

And the boundary-keeper, being carried, turned his face away, as though compassion were a smell that might defile him; for when men are threatened, they cling to boundaries as to breath.

And the preacher said, "They should not have climbed."

Now the woman heard, and her shoulders stiffened, and she said, "We did not climb for your Grail. We climbed for bread."

And the auditor answered, "Then go down."

And the woman laughed once, but the laugh was bitter, and she pointed to the storm as one points to a judge, and she said, "Down is death."

Now the hollow was a mercy, but it was a small mercy. And it came to pass that the magistrate stepped into it and set his pack down upon the stone, as though claiming ground. And he said, "We will sleep here."

And the woman's eyes narrowed, and she drew the coughing child closer.

And the confessor looked from the woman to the magistrate and said softly, "There is room to share."

And the magistrate said, "Share thy own blood then. I will not share what keeps men alive."

Now these words were not about blankets only, but about the soul. Yet the magistrate did not perceive it; for when a man believes he is righteous, he does not recognize his own hardness.

And the clerk began to speak of order, saying, "We will make arrangement. We will take the back wall. You will take the front. We will keep distance. There will be no mingling."

Now the clerk's arrangement sounded like fairness, and in it there was the polish of policy. Yet the hollow was not a hall, and the storm was not a teacher, and distance did not protect the weak from the cold.

And the auditor added, "We will not have a fire. Smoke wastes air."

But the woman, hearing this, said, "If the fire goes, the children go."

And the auditor looked upon the children and did not soften; for he had learned to treat faces as data when the numbers are threatened.

Then the seventh, standing at the mouth of the hollow, felt the old ache again: the ache of being outside, the ache of being displaced, the ache of being told that survival is a privilege of the worthy.

And he wanted to speak.

And his mouth opened.

But the Split One, seeing his mouth open, whispered fiercely, "Do not."

And the seventh turned his eyes upon the Split One, and he saw terror there, not of the storm, but of losing the story. For the Split One feared most of all the shame of being seen as wrong.

And the seventh's mouth closed.  
And thus he betrayed the children, not by hate, but by hunger for belonging.  
And the mountain wrote it down.  
Now the storm thickened, and the mouth of the hollow became a curtain of white. And the wind drove snow into the opening, and the snow piled upon the stone like a warning.  
And the woman said, "If you take the back wall, then the wind will take the front. The children cannot sleep at the mouth."  
And the magistrate said, "Then move them inward."  
And the woman said, "There is no inward. You are there."  
Now the confessor stepped forward again, and his voice trembled, and he said, "Let the children take the back wall. We can take the mouth."  
And the auditor answered swiftly, "Then we will freeze."  
And the confessor said, "Then we will suffer."  
And the preacher said, "Suffering proves."  
And this also was their doctrine: that pain itself was a certificate, and that the wounded were nearer heaven because they were wounded.  
And the confessor looked at the preacher as though he had seen a demon; for he perceived in that moment that the preacher loved suffering not as a healer loves pain, but as a judge loves sentence.  
Then the magistrate said, "Enough. We do not barter with strangers."  
And the boundary-keeper, whose fever had risen, muttered, "Do not mix."  
And the clerk said, "We came for the Spring."  
And the words of the clerk fell into the hollow like coins into a cup. For the poor have heard that sentence in many forms: \*We came for our purpose; your hunger is a distraction.\*  
And the woman's eyes hardened, and she said, "Then take it. Take the stone too. Take the air. But do not call it holy."  
Now at that word—holy—the preacher's face flushed, and he said, "Hold thy tongue."  
And the woman answered, "My tongue is all that is left."  
And the children began to cry, not loudly, but as children cry when they do not understand the shape of adult cruelty.  
And it came to pass that the Split One began to sway as though the stone beneath him were moving. And he covered his ears and whispered, "We can help later. We can help later. This is only one night. It is only one night."  
But the confessor said, "One night is a life at this height."  
And the auditor said, "Then their life is their responsibility."  
Now when the auditor said this, he did not know that he had spoken the central verse of the throne: \*Let the weak pay for the strong's certainty.\*  
And the seventh heard it and felt sickness.  
Then the magistrate did a thing that ended the debate. He took a blanket from his pack and threw it toward the woman, and the blanket landed in the snow at her feet.  
And the magistrate said, "Take it, and be silent."  
Now the blanket was clean, and it was warm; yet it was thrown as a bone is thrown. And the woman did not pick it up at once, for to pick it up would be

to accept the story that the magistrate had been merciful.

And the clerk said, "There. We have shared."

And the preacher said, "Let them be grateful."

And the auditor said, "Now we settle."

But the confessor's face twisted, and he said, "That is not sharing. That is purchase."

And the magistrate said, "Then purchase them quiet, for quiet is safety."

Now as they settled, the seven took the deeper part of the hollow by weight and by presence, and the poor were pressed toward the mouth where the snow drifted. And the small fire was weakened, for the wind drew its heat away.

And the woman wrapped the blanket about her children and tried to block the draft with her own body.

And it came to pass that a man entered the mouth of the hollow while the wind howled, and His cloak was plain, and His hands bore rope. And He looked upon the children and asked, "What seek ye upon this mountain?" And the clerk answered, "Proof." And the man said, "Bring living proof, and do as I do." And He lifted a child into His arms for a moment, as one testing the weight of mercy, and then He turned—downward—into the storm. And some watched Him go and said, "Behold, He will save them," and their hearts grew clean in their own sight.

And the seventh watched her, and shame pressed on him heavier than any pack. Now in the night the storm raged. And the wind roared, and the snow fell without rest. And the hollow became a prison of cold. And the boundary-keeper moaned in fever, and the confessor prayed, and the preacher slept as though the storm were proof of his righteousness.

And the clerk lay awake counting provisions, and the auditor lay awake counting hours. And the Split One lay awake counting sins—his own and others', and he could not tell them apart.

And the seventh lay awake listening to the children cough.

And it came to pass near the middle watch of the night that the coughing child's breath became shallow, and his cough became wet. And the woman whispered to him and rubbed his chest.

And the confessor heard, and he rose and went to them. And he knelt and placed his hand upon the child's forehead, and the child's skin was hot.

And the confessor looked back at the seven and said, "He burns. He needs warmth."

And the magistrate said, "We have given."

And the clerk said, "We have done our portion."

And the auditor said, "We cannot endanger ourselves."

Then the confessor said a thing that was close to sandals, though he did not know it: "If mercy endangers you, then mercy is the point."

And the preacher answered, "Mercy is not foolishness."

And the confessor said, "Then what is mercy?"

Now there was silence, for even a man of doctrine knows that some questions, once asked, do not go away.

And the seventh's heart beat hard. And he thought, If the Grail Spring makes men feel holy while children cough in the cold, then I do not know what God

is. Yet he did not yet dare to say it. For his conversion was not a leap; it was a bleeding.

And it came to pass that the confessor took his own cloak and wrapped it about the child. And the confessor shivered afterward, but he did not remove it.

And the auditor watched, and his eyes were troubled. For the auditor did not hate; he feared. And fear, when it is held long, becomes law.

And the Split One began to whisper again, "We must be kind. We must be safe. We must not—" and his whispering became a stutter, and his hands fluttered like trapped birds.

And the seventh watched the Split One and saw that the mountain was not breaking his body, but his contradictions.

Now at dawn the storm eased, and the wind fell to a low moan. And the snow lay thick, and the world was white and bright and cruel. And the seven rose stiffly, and the poor rose more stiffly.

And the woman looked at the hollow and looked at the trail beyond, and she said to the seven, "Will you go now?"

And the magistrate said, "We will go."

And the woman said, "And we will remain."

And the confessor said softly, "Come down with us."

But the woman shook her head, not in pride, but in despair, and she said, "Down is too far, and he is too sick."

Meaning the child.

And the auditor said, "Then you should not have climbed."

And the woman answered, "We climbed because the low country has no bread. You climbed because the high country has a story."

And those words struck the seventh like a stone.

And he looked at his pouch, and he looked at the child, and his hand moved again.

And he did not pour.

And he hated himself for it.

And thus, even after the night, he remained bound by the desire to be counted.

And the mountain wrote it down also.

Now the seven took their packs and stepped out into the snow, and the trail rose again. And as they climbed away, the seventh looked back once, and he saw the woman standing at the mouth of the hollow with the child wrapped in the confessor's cloak; and he saw her eyes, and they were not angry only—they were empty.

And it came to pass the seventh's mouth became bitter with something that was not thirst.

And he whispered to himself, "If Thou art God, be different than this."

And the mountain remained dry.

And it was the only Spring.

And thus ended the fourth day.

## Chapter 5

## The Buffer Day

And it came to pass on the fifth day that the sky cleared, and the snow became a hard crust under the sun. And the storm that had raged became only a memory, and because men forget quickly what they survived, the six began to speak again of worthiness as though worthiness had preserved them.

Yet the mountain had not changed its nature; only the weather had changed its face. For the mountain is a ledger, and it keeps account, and it payeth not in anger but in consequence.

Now as they climbed from the hollow of the poor, the trail narrowed again, and the stones rose into ribs. And the boundary-keeper, though still fevered, said little, and his eyes were dull. And the confessor had no cloak, and his shoulders shook. And the seventh's ankle burned, and the pain in it had become a constant companion.

And the auditor walked at the front and looked often at the sun's angle, and he calculated within himself. And at a place where the rock made a small wall against the wind, he called them to stop.

And they stopped.

And the auditor took his measure, and he unstopped the pouches and examined the lines within. And he did not speak at first, but he frowned; for the lines were lower than they ought to have been.

Then the clerk said, "How standeth our provision?"

And the auditor said, "We have spent the mercy."

Now when he said mercy, he meant the extra day of water that had been carried as a buffer against delay. Yet it is a strange thing that the word mercy should be used for a portion reserved for the self; and the seventh, hearing it, felt that the mountain had mocked them by placing holy words upon selfish things.

And the auditor said, "We carried enough for the days of ascent and descent, and one day more. That day is being eaten. Not by accident only, but by our choices."

And the magistrate said, "We chose what was necessary."

And the auditor answered, "Necessary is not free."

And the preacher said, "We cannot drink doctrine."

And the auditor said, "No. But we will drink consequence."

And there was silence, for consequence is a word that speaks plainly even to proud men.

Then the confessor, whose lips were pale, said, "If the extra day is being eaten, then let us turn back before we perish."

Now when he said turn back, his voice trembled, not only from fear of death, but from fear of scorn. For to return empty is to return condemned, and condemnation is a hunger that gnaws.

And the magistrate looked upon him and said, "We do not return."

And the clerk said, "We cannot return."

And the preacher said, "To return is to confess failure."

And the boundary-keeper, carried, muttered, "We must not be shamed."

Now these words came forth as though they were wisdom. Yet their wisdom was not toward life, but toward reputation. And the seventh saw it as one sees a

knife in light.

And the auditor said, "We will not return. We will tighten again."

And the seventh said, though he did not intend to speak, "Tighten what?"

And the auditor looked upon him and said, "Tighten mercy. Tighten portion. Tighten pace. Tighten the mouth."

And the seventh's throat tightened at that, as though the word itself had become a rope.

Now as they sat, the Split One began to rub his hands together as though trying to warm them. And he said, "We should have shared the hollow. We should not have shared the hollow. We should have—" and he stopped, and his eyes were wide, and he whispered, "I cannot count it. I cannot count it."

And the auditor, hearing him, said, "Counting is not your task. Obedience is."

And the Split One nodded quickly, as a child nods to a hard father, and the nodding did not comfort him.

And it came to pass that when they rose to continue, the seventh walked behind again, and his heart was heavy. For he perceived that the buffer day was being eaten not only by cold and injury, but by the stiffening of their souls. And he began to understand a law of the mountain: that the longer men delay mercy, the more costly mercy becomes, until at last it is called impossible.

And the mountain answered him not with words, but by setting another test before them.

For after they had climbed some hours, they came upon a cleft in the rock where the trail passed close to a fall. And in that cleft there was a man sitting, his back against stone, his leg stretched out before him. And beside him lay a broken staff, and his pack was open, and the wind had taken part of his cloth.

And his face was cracked with cold, and his eyes were glassy, and he looked up as one who has already spent hope.

And he said, "Sirs."

Now when he said sirs, it was as the beggar had said sirs at the gate. And the seventh's stomach turned, for the mountain loved to repeat its verses.

And the man said, "I cannot go down. I slipped, and my ankle broke, and my staff broke. I have little water. Give me enough that I might reach the low rocks."

Now the low rocks were a day's walk below, perhaps less in strength, perhaps more in weakness. But the man's eyes did not measure days; they measured thirst.

And the magistrate looked upon him and said, "We have no time."

And the clerk said, "We have no surplus."

And the boundary-keeper muttered, "He is not of us."

And the preacher said, "Endure."

And the auditor said, "We cannot afford another delay."

Now the seventh heard these words and he felt a heat rise in his chest that was not warmth. For he remembered the buffer day, and he remembered the hollow, and he remembered the child coughing in the night. And he perceived

that the words we cannot afford were spoken not as truth, but as cover.

And the confessor, seeing the man's face, knelt beside him. And the confessor said, "How long hast thou sat here?"

And the man said, "Since the storm."

And the confessor's mouth tightened, and he looked back at the seven and said, "If he hath sat since the storm, then he hath had no shelter. He will not last."

And the auditor said, "Then he should not have climbed."

And the man, hearing this, laughed once, and the laugh was weak. And he said, "I climbed because my village sent me. They said: bring back proof. They said: bring back water. They said: be worthy."

Now when the man said proof, the clerk's eyes sharpened; for he heard his own language spoken by a stranger. And he was offended, not because it was false, but because it was familiar.

And the seventh, hearing the man's words, thought, The mountain puts our own doctrines in another's mouth, that we might hear them as cruelty.

And it came to pass that the auditor took up his measure again and said, "If we give, we shorten our own life. If we shorten our own life, we lose the quest. If we lose the quest, we return shamed. And shame will devour us all."

Now the auditor had spoken truly what the others had only implied: that scorn was as real to them as thirst. And the seventh saw it clearly, and because he saw it clearly, his disgust grew.

And the confessor said, "We carried one day more, that we might endure hardship. If this is not hardship, what is?"

And the auditor said, "The buffer was for us."

Then the confessor said, "Then we carried selfishness and called it wisdom."

And the preacher frowned and said, "Careful thy tongue."

And the confessor answered, "My tongue is careful. My heart is weary."

Now the seventh stood behind them and watched, and he desired to pour water into the man's mouth. Yet he also felt the old chain: the fear of being judged by the six, and the fear of being cast out, and the fear of failing the one journey and being scorned.

And he saw within himself that he was not different than the others; he only hated himself more.

And the mountain waited.

Then the man with the broken ankle lifted his head and said softly, "I do not need thy speech. I need thy water."

And the simplicity of that sentence struck the seventh like a hammer, for it stripped all doctrine away.

And the seventh stepped forward.

And the magistrate said, "Do not."

And the clerk said, "We cannot."

And the auditor said, "If you pour, you will make us all accountable."

For the auditor feared not only the loss of water, but the loss of the story that the group was righteous.

And the seventh's hand went to his pouch.

And he hesitated.

And in that hesitation the mountain taught him another law: that the cost of sandals is always paid in the moment of hesitation; for the fear itself is the first tax.

Then the seventh said, and his voice surprised him again, "If we help now, the cost is less."

And the auditor said, "Less than what?"

And the seventh answered, "Less than if we meet him later as a corpse. Less than if we are forced to carry him with no water. Less than if the mountain makes him our mirror at the top."

Now the seventh did not know that he had spoken prophecy; he only spoke the pressure he felt.

And the auditor's eyes narrowed, and he said, "You speak like a man who loves mercy more than survival."

And the seventh answered, "Survival without mercy is already a kind of death."

Then the preacher said, "You are becoming dramatic."

And the seventh said, "I am becoming honest."

And the Split One began to shake, and he whispered, "We can do both. We can pour a little. A little is mercy. A little is safety. A little—" and he sobbed, and his sob became a laugh, and he covered his mouth.

Now the confessor looked upon the seventh as though pleading, and he said, "Do it."

And the seventh did it.

He unstopped his pouch and poured water into the broken man's cup, and the water made a sound like a small stream in a dry land. And the man drank, and his throat moved, and color returned a little to his lips.

And the seventh poured again, not much, but enough.

And when he stopped, the line in his pouch had fallen.

And the auditor watched the line fall as one watches a candle shorten. And he said, "You have spent the buffer."

And the seventh said, "No. I have used it."

And the clerk said, "For what? For a stranger who will not bear witness for you?"

And the seventh looked at him and said, "Witness of what?"

And the clerk's mouth opened, and then closed; for even a clerk can sense when his own words have betrayed him.

Then the magistrate said, "We go."

And the seventh said, "He cannot go."

And the magistrate said, "That is his burden."

And the seventh looked upon the man with the broken ankle and saw that if they went, the man would die. Not because God had willed it, but because the righteous had withheld.

And the seventh felt a fury rise—not fury at the mountain, but fury at the clean logic that made death feel deserved.

And he said, "Then we carry him to the low rocks."

Now when he said this, the others recoiled, for carrying costs time, and time costs water, and water was already short.

And the auditor said, "If we carry him, we lose the quest."  
And the seventh said, "If we do not carry him, we have already lost."  
And the magistrate stepped close, and his shadow fell again, and he said,  
"You will not command us."  
And the seventh said, "I am not commanding. I am refusing."  
And the words of refusal hung in the air, and they were heavy. For refusal is  
the first act of sandals: not to seize authority, but to refuse harm.  
And the confessor, after a long moment, said, "We will carry him a little  
way."  
And the auditor said, "A little way is still delay."  
And the confessor said, "Then let delay be our confession."  
Now the group did not become holy in that moment. They did not become kind.  
They only became unable to pretend that kindness was free.  
And it came to pass that they made a sling again, and they lifted the broken  
man between them, and their pace slowed. And the sun moved across the sky,  
and the shadow lengthened, and each step became an argument.  
And the auditor's measure grew stricter.  
And the preacher's sermons grew sharper.  
And the clerk's eyes grew colder.  
And the boundary-keeper's boundaries grew tighter.  
And the Split One began to mutter numbers and prayers in the same breath, and  
the two tongues tangled.  
And the seventh carried, and the carrying burned his ankle, and the burning  
did not stop; yet something in him felt strangely clear. For clarity is  
sometimes born in cost.  
And as they went, the seventh understood the law he had spoken: that sandals  
is cheapest early, and thrones is always paid later with interest. For mercy  
delayed becomes rescue, and rescue becomes sacrifice, and sacrifice becomes  
death.  
And the mountain remained dry.  
And it was the only Spring.  
And thus ended the fifth day.

## Chapter 6

### The Interest

And it came to pass on the sixth day that they were still above the line of  
trees, and there was no softness in the world. And the sun rose as a pale  
coin, and the wind moved low, and the snow that had crusted cracked underfoot  
like thin glass.  
And the broken man whom they had lifted from the cleft was named among them  
as a burden, though his name was Elias. For when men begin to fear their own  
scarcity, they stop speaking names and begin speaking weights.  
And the auditor said at dawn, "We have spent the buffer. Therefore we must  
recover time."  
Now when he said recover, he meant steal. Yet he did not call it stealing,  
for stealing is a word that shames; and men love words that hide shame.  
And the magistrate said, "We will move faster."

And the preacher said, "We will be proven."

And the clerk said, "We will return with witness."

And the boundary-keeper, fevered still, muttered, "We must keep clean."

And the confessor said, "We must keep alive."

But the seventh said within himself, \*The mountain does not forgive debt by haste.\*

For he had begun to see the nature of interest: that a debt taken in cruelty is paid in blood, and a mercy delayed returns as a demand.

Now they carried Elias for a time, until they reached a band of lower rocks where the wind was less sharp. And because the seventh had poured early, Elias's eyes were clearer, and he could bear a little weight. And he leaned upon a staff that the seventh had cut from a fallen branch caught in a crevice, and he walked, limping, with his teeth clenched.

And the auditor saw him walking and said, "Behold, he walketh. Therefore the matter is finished."

But the confessor said, "The matter is not finished until he is safe."

And the auditor answered, "Safe is a word without end."

Now Elias, hearing them, said quietly, "Sirs, I need not thy debate. I need only a path that doth not kill me."

And the seventh looked upon him and said, "Then walk with me."

And thus the seventh took Elias as a shadow to his own shame, and he could not cast him off.

And it came to pass that after they had gone a little way, the trail climbed again to a ridge that was narrow as a knife. And the ridge was exposed, and the wind there moved with sudden hands. And to one side the mountain fell away into a white emptiness.

And the auditor said, "We will not stop here. We will cross quickly."

And the magistrate said, "Keep thy line."

And they began to cross.

Now Elias's ankle, though splinted, was weak; and the seventh stayed near him, and he put his shoulder under Elias's arm. And the pace of them became the pace of two.

And the auditor, going before, looked back and saw the pace slow, and his face tightened, and he said, "You are costing us."

And the seventh answered, "Yes."

And the auditor said, "Then stop it."

And the seventh said, "No."

Now that word no was small, but it was heavier than rock; for it was the first time the seventh had said no without apology.

And the Split One, hearing the no, began to tremble. And he whispered, "No is rebellion. No is pride. No is mercy. No is—" and he swallowed, and his eyes darted. For his mind could not decide whether no was sin or salvation, and the undeciding was a knife inside him.

And it came to pass in the midst of that ridge that the wind struck as though it had waited for the argument. And the gust came sideways, and the snow lifted, and the world vanished for a moment behind white.

And in that moment Elias's foot slipped.

And he cried out, and his body lurched toward the edge.  
And the seventh lunged and seized him, and the seventh's ankle screamed with pain, and he slid on his own foot, and for a breath they were both moving toward the fall.  
Then the magistrate, who was nearest, turned and caught the seventh's strap with one hand and Elias's sleeve with the other; and he planted his feet and held.  
And thus the magistrate saved them, not out of sandals, but out of strength; for even a hard man may catch another when the fall is in his sight.  
And when the gust passed, they lay gasping on the ridge, and their hands were numb, and their hearts hammered.  
And the auditor stood above them and said, "Do you see? This is what mercy buys."  
And the seventh, breathing hard, said, "This is what debt buys."  
And the auditor's eyes narrowed.  
Now they rose, and they crossed the ridge, and they did not speak much thereafter. For a near-fall quiets even righteous tongues.  
And it came to pass that when they reached a place where stone formed a shallow bowl again, they stopped to rest. And the auditor took his measure and did not offer it; for his anger had become a discipline.  
And Elias sat with his head down, and his lips were dry.  
And the seventh looked at Elias's mouth and felt again the law: sandals early is cheaper; sandals late becomes rescue; rescue becomes risk; risk becomes blood.  
And the seventh said to the group, "If we had given at the hollow, we would not be here with blood in our mouths."  
And the preacher answered, "If we had given at the hollow, we might not be here at all."  
And the seventh said, "Then we might have been men."  
Now the preacher's face flushed, and he said, "You speak blasphemy."  
And the seventh said, "Then holiness is blasphemy to itself."  
And the confessor, hearing this, covered his face for a moment, for he felt the truth and feared its consequences.  
And the boundary-keeper muttered, "Do not speak against the climb."  
And the clerk said, "We did not come to be men. We came to be worthy."  
And Elias lifted his head at that and said, "Worthy of what?"  
And the clerk looked away.  
Now the auditor said, "We must move. We have lost half a day."  
And the confessor said, "We lost it when we displaced the poor."  
And the auditor said, "That was necessary."  
And the confessor said, "Necessary is the idol's name."  
And at that word idol, the boundary-keeper hissed, and the preacher's eyes flashed, and the magistrate's jaw tightened. For men do not like to be told that their righteousness is a god.  
And it came to pass that they moved on, and the trail grew steeper. And the air thinned further, and the seventh's ankle began to fail. And he did not speak of it, for he had been trained by shame to hide pain.

But Elias saw it, for a wounded man can see wounds.  
And Elias said quietly, "Why do you stay?"  
And the seventh said, "Because I have stayed below and been left."  
And Elias said, "Then you know."  
And the seventh could not answer, for knowing is not yet doing.  
Now in the afternoon they came upon another sign of the mountain's interest.  
For on a ledge above them there was a figure—one of the poor families from the hollow. It was the woman, and her scarf was gone, and her hair blew loose in the wind, and her face was streaked with soot and tears.  
And she called down to them, her voice thin but sharp, and she said, "Sirs!"  
And the word sirs struck the seventh again like a repeated verse.  
And the magistrate looked up and said, "Why art thou here?"  
And the woman cried, "My child is worse. He cannot breathe. The storm broke him. We must go down, but we cannot carry him. We have no strength. We have no water."  
Now when she said no water, the auditor's eyes went to the pouches as though to lock them. And the clerk's face tightened, for he remembered the blanket thrown like a bone. And the preacher looked away, for he did not want the poor to have a voice.  
And the confessor's face crumpled, for he knew.  
And the seventh felt his stomach drop, for he knew also: this was interest. This was the cost returning, not as guilt, but as flesh.  
And the woman cried, "If you have found any mercy on this mountain, bring it now."  
And the auditor said, "We have none."  
Now he spoke truly in one sense, for the buffer was gone. Yet in another sense he lied; for mercy was not a portion, but a choice.  
And the seventh stepped forward.  
And the magistrate said, "No."  
And the clerk said, "We cannot."  
And the boundary-keeper muttered, "Do not mix."  
And the preacher said, "We are not responsible."  
Then the seventh said, and his voice was not loud, but it was steady, "This is the debt."  
And the auditor answered, "Then let the debtor pay his own."  
And the seventh said, "We are the debtors."  
Now the Split One, hearing this, began to sob openly; and his sobbing turned to laughter; and his laughter turned to a sound like choking. And he fell to his knees, and he said, "We should have helped. We should not have helped. We should have—" and he clawed at his hair. For his mind sought a line where there was no line, a way to keep the story and keep the soul.  
And the seventh looked upon him and felt pity, yet he also felt anger, for pity that does not act becomes another cruelty.  
Then the confessor said, "We go to them."  
And the magistrate said, "If we go, we lose time."  
And the confessor said, "We have already lost it. Do you not see?"  
And the confessor's eyes were wet, and his voice broke. For at last he had

been forced to choose a side, and the choosing hurt.  
Then the auditor said, "If we climb back to them, we spend what little remains. Then we will all come down empty. And the people will scorn us. And the scorn will destroy what we stand for."  
Now the auditor had spoken the secret gospel again: that reputation is life.  
And the seventh heard it and felt it like poison.  
And the seventh said, "Then let it be destroyed."  
And the words fell like a stone into water, and the ripples went through the group.  
And the magistrate stared at him, as though he had watched a man step out of a tribe.  
And the clerk's mouth opened, then closed.  
And the preacher's face twisted as though he had tasted bile.  
And the boundary-keeper shut his eyes.  
And the Split One rocked on his knees, whispering, "Both. Both. Both."  
Then Elias, who had been silent, spoke. And he said, "If you return to them, you will lose your climb."  
And the seventh said, "I have not found anything worth keeping."  
Now those words were not yet the summit refusal of holiness; yet they were the seed of it.  
And it came to pass that the confessor and the seventh and Elias turned their steps upward toward the ledge where the woman waited. And the magistrate and the auditor and the clerk and the preacher stood still.  
And the boundary-keeper, being carried, whispered, "Do not leave us."  
And the Split One cried, "Do not make me choose!"  
But the mountain had already made the choice, for the mountain always makes the choice; men only obey.  
And as the seventh climbed toward the woman, his ankle burned, and his breath tore, and his pouch felt lighter than it should; yet he felt also a strange peace, not because the cost was gone, but because the pretending was gone.  
And thus the mountain taught him: that to choose sandals early is to save thyself from later slaughter; and to delay is to purchase a cruelty that thou wilt one day call fate.  
And the mountain remained dry.  
And it was the only Spring.  
And thus ended the sixth day.

## Chapter 7

### The Debt Paid

And it came to pass that when the seventh and the confessor and Elias turned their steps upward toward the ledge, the air grew thinner still, and their breathing became loud as labor. For to turn back upon the mountain is harder than to continue; and the mountain, being a judge, demandeth payment when a man repenteth late.  
And the seventh's ankle burned as though a coal had been set within it, and each step upon it was a sermon preached in pain. And the confessor's shoulders shook beneath the cold, for he had given his cloak to the child.

And Elias limped, and his face was set, for he knew that if they delayed long, he would again become the burden, and shame would return as a chain. And as they climbed, the seventh heard behind him the voices of the others, faint through wind.

The auditor called, "We cannot afford this."

The preacher called, "You are forsaking the climb."

The clerk called, "You are throwing away witness."

The magistrate did not call. For a hard man does not beg; he only waits to punish.

And the boundary-keeper, fevered, cried once—whether from pain or fear, the seventh could not tell.

Now the Split One did call. And his voice was high and broken, and he cried, "Do not make me choose!"

And that cry pierced the seventh, for he understood it. For the seventh had lived his life in that cry, wanting mercy and wanting belonging, wanting truth and wanting peace. Yet he also understood now that to refuse choosing is itself a choice, and the choice always falls downward.

And it came to pass they reached the ledge.

And the woman was there, and her face was drawn tight as a cloth stretched too far. And beside her the child lay wrapped in blankets, and his breathing was shallow and fast, and each breath rattled as though his chest were full of stones.

And the woman saw them and said, "Is it only you?"

And the seventh's throat tightened, for he knew what her question meant: that the six had again remained where cost was lower and proof was safer.

And the confessor knelt and placed his hand upon the child's forehead, and the child was hot and then cold and then hot again, as fever shifts like a wind. And the confessor said, "We must take him down."

And the woman said, "We cannot carry him."

And Elias said, "We can, if we trade."

And the woman looked at Elias with suspicion, for poverty learns to distrust bargains.

And Elias said, "Not money. Weight."

And thus Elias spoke the mountain's language plainly: that salvation on the ridge is not in wishes, but in burden exchange.

And it came to pass that the seventh opened his pack, and he removed rope and cloth and a small iron pan, and he laid them upon the stone. And the confessor removed a book bound in leather—his private comfort—and set it down. And Elias removed his own spare garments and a knife.

And the woman, seeing this, did not thank them yet; for she had been thanked into hunger many times. But her eyes changed a little, as though a door had cracked.

And the seventh said, "We will make a sling."

And they made it.

Now as they worked, the wind bit their hands, and the seventh's fingers went numb. And the child coughed and coughed, and the cough sounded wet and deep, and the sound of it was a clock.

And the seventh felt anger rise again—not at the mountain, but at the false holiness that had turned this child into interest.

And he said within himself, \*This is what it costs when mercy is delayed: you pay later in blood and panic.\*

And he bound the knots harder.

And it came to pass that when the sling was made, they lifted the child gently into it. And the child's head lolled, and his eyelids fluttered, and his mouth was open as though searching for air.

And the confessor said to the woman, "You must walk close. Speak to him. Keep him with us."

And the woman nodded, and her jaw trembled, and she began to whisper to the child, not prayers, but names—his name, and the names of places below, and the names of bread and water and sun.

For a mother knows that life is held sometimes by memory.

And the seventh looked upon her and thought, \*This is sandals: not a feeling, but a carrying.\*

Now it came to pass that as they prepared to descend from the ledge, the magistrate and the others appeared below on the trail, having waited where the ridge widened. And the snow about their boots was trampled, for waiting also leaves marks.

And when the magistrate saw the sling, his face hardened further, and he said, "What is this?"

And the confessor said, "Our debt."

And the auditor said, "You have made us all debtors."

And the seventh said, "We were debtors already. We only refused to pay."

And the clerk looked upon the child and said, "He is sick. He will slow us."

And the preacher said, "He is not our covenant."

And the woman heard the word covenant and spat into the snow. And she said, "Your covenant is a knife."

Now the boundary-keeper, carried, lifted his head weakly and whispered, "Do not mix. Do not bring sickness among us."

And the confessor's face twisted, and he said, "You speak of sickness as though it were sin."

And the boundary-keeper, hearing this, shut his eyes; for it was too hard to admit that his boundaries had become cruelty.

And it came to pass that the Split One, seeing the child, began to rock, and he said, "We must help. We must keep moving. We must help and keep moving. We must—" and his voice cracked, and he covered his mouth, and tears ran down his face and froze upon his cheeks.

And the seventh looked upon him and felt a strange compassion, for the Split One was not evil; he was broken by the impossible gospel of being both holy and safe at all times.

And the mountain did not comfort him.

Now the auditor said, "We cannot carry all. We have Elias. We have the wounded. Now you add the child."

And the confessor answered, "Yes."

And the auditor said, "Then who will pay?"

And the seventh said, "We all will."

Now at that word all, the magistrate's eyes narrowed, for he hated shared obligation; shared obligation dissolves hierarchies.

And he said, "We will not."

And the seventh said, "Then you will go up alone."

And the magistrate said, "Then you will not reach the Spring."

And the seventh answered, "Then we will not drink emptiness and call it God."

Now those words startled even the seventh, for they came from deeper than thought. They were the first time he had spoken his disillusionment aloud.

And the preacher laughed once, sharp, and said, "You speak as though you have already judged the Grail."

And the seventh said, "I have judged the pattern."

And the auditor, hearing the word pattern, felt something uneasy move within him, for he had begun to suspect that the seventh was right; yet suspicion is not repentance.

And it came to pass that the magistrate made a decision. He said, "We will carry the child to the next shelf only. If he lives, he lives. If he dies, he dies. We will not lose the climb."

Now the magistrate called this compromise. Yet it was not a compromise; it was the old cruelty dressed in a small mercy.

And the confessor said, "A shelf is not safety."

And the magistrate said, "Then call it what you will. It is what you get."

And the Split One cried, "Yes—yes—this is good—this is both—this is—" and his relief sounded like sickness.

And the seventh looked upon the magistrate and understood: the magistrate had offered the Split One a narcotic. For the Split One did not want goodness; he wanted the feeling of goodness without the cost.

And the seventh said quietly, "The mountain will not accept your shelf."

And the magistrate said, "The mountain accepts the strong."

And the seventh said, "The mountain reveals the strong."

And they began to move.

Now they carried the child, and the woman walked close, and Elias limped, and the boundary-keeper was borne, and the seventh's ankle burned, and the confessor shivered. And the pace of them became slow. And the sky above them remained bright and indifferent.

And as they walked, the seventh began to see the interest with his eyes.

For each time they stopped to adjust the sling, the child coughed more. And each time they argued, the wind cut deeper. And each time the auditor measured, his face grew tighter. And each time the preacher spoke of proof, the child's breath rattled as if mocking him.

And it came to pass near midday the child's breathing worsened. And the woman cried out and said, "He is leaving!"

And the confessor pressed his ear to the child's chest and listened, and his face grew pale. And he looked up and said, "We must stop. We must warm him. We must give him water."

Now the word water struck the group like a bell, for water was not only life; it was proof.

And the auditor said, "If we give water now, we will not have enough later."  
And the confessor said, "Later is not promised."  
And the clerk said, "If we pour now, we return with nothing."  
And the seventh said, "Then return with nothing."  
And the preacher said, "You are throwing away holiness."  
And the seventh answered, "Holiness that cannot keep a child breathing is not holiness."  
And the boundary-keeper whispered, "Do not."  
And the Split One whispered, "A little. Only a little. A little is both."  
And the magistrate looked upon the child and saw death near. And even a hard man does not love death in his sight, for death is messy and breaks control.  
And the magistrate said, "A mouthful only."  
And the auditor nodded quickly, relieved; for he loved a small mercy that preserved the story.  
Then the seventh unstopped his pouch.  
And he poured.  
And when the water touched the child's lips, the child swallowed weakly. And the swallow was small, but it was a seed of life.  
And the woman sobbed, and her sob sounded like thanksgiving; yet the seventh did not feel pride. For he knew: a mouthful now was being purchased by the suffering of many later.  
And the seventh poured again.  
And the auditor's hand rose as though to stop him.  
And the seventh looked at him and said, "Early is cheaper."  
And the auditor's hand fell.  
Now the seventh did not know whether the child would live. But he knew the mountain's law: if they would have given at the hollow, they could have spared this panic; if they would have given at the hollow, they could have descended with a steady pace instead of a desperate one; if they would have given at the hollow, the cost would have been shared in comfort, not demanded in terror.  
And thus the seventh tasted the bitterness of delayed mercy as plainly as he tasted thirst.  
And it came to pass that after the water, the child's breathing steadied a little. And the confessor said, "We must take him down further. The next shelf is not enough."  
And the magistrate's face tightened, for he saw his climb slipping away.  
And the clerk's eyes became cold.  
And the preacher's jaw clenched.  
And the auditor stared at the lines in the pouches as though the lines were scripture.  
And the Split One began to rock again, whispering, "Further, but not too far. Mercy, but not loss. Mercy, but not—"  
And the seventh heard him and knew: the mountain would not allow his split to remain.  
And they moved again, slower still.  
And thus the debt was paid, not in one coin, but in many.

And the mountain remained dry.  
And it was the only Spring.  
And thus ended the seventh day.

## Chapter 8

### The Last Push

And it came to pass that after the mouthful given to the child, the party moved as men move after a sentence has been pronounced: slower, quieter, and with a fear that has changed its shape.

For before, their fear had been of failure and of scorn. But now their fear was also of being exposed—exposed as men whose holiness could not keep breath in a child.

And the magistrate's face remained hard, yet his eyes were restless; for a man of command hates when the mountain forces him to negotiate with mercy.

And the auditor watched the pouches without ceasing, as though numbers could become salvation.

And the clerk's mouth stayed in a thin line, for he felt his witness slipping.

And the preacher's words grew sharper, for when a man's doctrine is threatened by compassion, he tightens doctrine until it becomes a weapon.

And the boundary-keeper, fevered still, muttered against mixing, as though sickness were a moral stain.

And the Split One whispered both ways at once, and his whispering became a hiss, and his hiss became a prayer without God.

And the seventh walked with his ankle burning and his heart burning also; and he began to understand that the mountain did not only test men—it forged them. And he feared what it forged.

Now it came to pass that as they descended a little with the child, they came to a band of rock where the wind was less cruel and the snow was broken by patches of dark stone. And in that place there was a narrow notch that made a shelter, and it was not warm, yet it was not death.

And the woman knelt there and held the child's face between her hands, and she spoke his name into his ear as though name were breath. And the confessor knelt beside her and prayed, not for holiness, but for air.

And the seventh stood and watched and felt his pouch hang lighter, and he did not regret it; yet he felt the weight of the group's anger like a hand at his back.

And it came to pass that after a time the child's breathing steadied. Not fully, but enough that the rattle became softer. And the woman looked up at the confessor and said, "Will he live?"

And the confessor's eyes were wet, and he said, "If mercy keeps coming."

Now the woman turned her eyes upon the seven, and her gaze passed over the magistrate and the preacher and the clerk and the auditor as one who has learned the faces of refusal.

And she said to the seventh, "Will you keep coming?"

And the seventh's throat tightened, for he understood that her question was not about feet, but about heart.

And he said, "I do not know how to stop."  
And the woman said, "Then do not stop."  
And those words settled in the seventh like a seed, for they were sandals  
words: not lofty, but stubborn.  
Now the magistrate, seeing that the child was not dying in that moment, said,  
"We have done enough. We go up."  
And the confessor said, "Will you leave them?"  
And the magistrate answered, "We have already paid."  
Now payment is another holy word that can become a devil's word, for it turns  
mercy into a debt cleared rather than a life preserved.  
And the woman heard him and said, "You have paid nothing. You have only  
stopped stealing for an hour."  
And the magistrate's face flushed, and he stepped toward her as though to  
correct her; but the seventh moved without thinking and stood between them.  
And the magistrate stopped, not because he had grown gentle, but because  
correction in the sight of the poor looks like cruelty; and he still loved  
optics, though he called it honor.  
And the preacher said, "Do not contend."  
But the woman laughed, and her laugh was raw, and she said, "You call my  
child's breath contention."  
And the preacher looked away.  
And it came to pass that the party made a decision that was not spoken  
plainly. They would leave the woman and the child in the notch and climb on.  
They told themselves that the notch was shelter. They told themselves that  
the mother could descend slowly. They told themselves that the child had  
received what was possible.  
And the seventh knew the lie in the telling; yet he also knew that if they  
stayed longer, the party would break in open violence.  
And thus the mountain taught him another sorrow: that late mercy forces a man  
to choose between imperfect help and total collapse.  
And the seventh hated that sorrow.  
Now as they prepared to go, Elias approached the woman and said, "The low  
rocks are not far. If you move at dusk when the sun softens, you may make  
it."  
And the woman nodded, and she did not thank him, for she had no strength for  
gratitude. She only said, "Do not bring back proof. Bring back water. Or  
bring back nothing."  
And the seventh heard and felt the words cut him, for he knew: he had come  
for proof, and proof had made him empty.  
And the seven turned upward again.  
Now the ascent above the notch was steeper, and the stone was more broken.  
And the trail became a wound in the mountain's side, and the wound led toward  
the crown.  
And the auditor said, "We must recover time."  
And the confessor said, "Time is gone."  
And the auditor said, "Then we recover by tightening."  
And the seventh said within himself, \*Tightening is the language of thrones.\*

Now at the first hour the auditor reduced the portion again.  
And the seventh's mouth grew dry.  
And at the second hour the magistrate commanded silence, and the silence was not peace but pressure.  
And the Split One tried to obey the silence, yet his thoughts screamed. And he began to twitch, and his fingers picked at his lips until they bled. And he whispered without sound, moving his mouth as though speaking to a judge only he could see.  
And at the third hour the preacher began to sing quietly under his breath, not a song of joy, but a song of control; for rhythm steadies the mind when mercy threatens it.  
And the boundary-keeper muttered about mixing, and he recoiled when Elias's elbow brushed him, as though touch itself were defilement.  
And the clerk began to speak of witness again. He said, "We must return full. A full pouch will close mouths."  
Now when he said close mouths, he meant the mouths of those who would scorn them. And the seventh heard and understood: the goal of the Grail had become not God, but defense.  
And the seventh's heart became heavy.  
Now it came to pass that near midday they reached a place where the trail crossed a slab of rock that was smooth and slanted, and beneath it the snow had hardened into ice. And the slab was like a table tilted toward death.  
And the magistrate said, "Cross one at a time."  
And the auditor said, "No stopping."  
And the confessor said, "Slow. Slow."  
But the preacher said, "Faith."  
And the word faith was used like a whip.  
And Elias, being lame, looked upon the slab and swallowed, and he said, "I cannot."  
And the clerk said, "Then you should not have come."  
And Elias looked at him and said, "I came because my village sent me."  
And the clerk answered, "Then your village will learn."  
Now those words were cruel, and they were spoken as instruction. And the seventh heard them and felt sickness rise.  
And the seventh said, "We can anchor a rope."  
And the auditor answered, "Rope costs time."  
And the seventh said, "Death costs more."  
Now the auditor stared at him, and the stare was hate mixed with fear; for the seventh's words were becoming a new scripture, and the auditor did not want a new scripture.  
And the magistrate, seeing the slab and knowing that a fall would cost all, allowed the rope. And the rope was anchored, and they crossed slowly, and each step was careful.  
And thus the mountain showed them again: when fear is for the self, it tightens mercy; when fear is for reputation, it tightens truth; but when fear is for actual death, even hard men allow sandals, though they call it prudence.

And the seventh saw it and grew colder, for he desired not prudence, but love.

Now after the slab they climbed a long ridge of scree, and the stones slid underfoot. And the air became so thin that speech became labor. And their tongues swelled in their mouths.

And in that place the seventh began to feel a strange emptiness.

For he had expected that near the summit he would feel closer to God. He had expected a warmth, a clarity, a confirmation. He had expected that if he endured enough, some holy feeling would come as payment.

Yet as they climbed, he felt only thirst, and the thirst was not only in his mouth but in his soul.

And he thought, \*If God is at the top, why do men become worse as they approach Him?\*

And the thought would not leave.

Now the Split One, in that thin air, began to fracture openly.

For he began to speak aloud to no one, saying, “We are merciful. We are worthy. We are merciful because we are worthy. We are worthy because we are merciful. We are—” and he stopped and stared at his own hands as though they were foreign.

And then he laughed. And the laughter was not joy; it was the sound of a mind slipping.

And the preacher hissed, “Be silent.”

And the Split One whispered, “I cannot.”

And the auditor said, “Keep moving.”

And the Split One said, “If I move, I betray. If I stop, I betray.”

And thus he spoke the true paradox of the throne: that when a man serves two masters—proof and mercy—each step becomes a sin.

And the seventh heard and understood, and he felt terror; for he could see that the Split One was what happens when a man refuses to choose sandals until the choosing is forced by pain.

Now in the late afternoon the sky cleared completely, and the sun struck the crown ridge with a brightness that made it look near. And the summit seemed close enough to touch, though the mountain still had hours of teeth left.

And the clerk, seeing the crown, began to smile, and his smile was sharp. And he said, “Behold. The Spring is near.”

And the preacher lifted his hands slightly as though receiving a blessing.

And the magistrate’s eyes hardened with determination.

And the auditor’s mouth tightened with calculation.

And the boundary-keeper muttered, “We will be clean.”

And the confessor said softly, “We will be tested.”

But the seventh looked upon the crown ridge and felt nothing but dread. For he perceived that the nearer they came to the Spring, the more they worshiped the feeling they imagined it would give them; and he began to suspect that the feeling itself was the idol.

And he whispered within himself, \*If the Grail is only a feeling that leaves the thirsty still thirsty, then it is not God.\*

And the mountain did not answer.

Now they camped that night in a shallow scrape of rock below the crown. And the wind was mild, and the sky was full of stars like cold eyes. And the seven lay close, and their breath made small clouds.

And the auditor measured the last of the portions for that day, and the portions were small.

And the seventh drank and felt no comfort. And he watched the others drink and felt them swell with a kind of righteousness, as though the nearness of the Spring had already washed them.

And the clerk whispered, "Tomorrow we drink."

And the preacher whispered, "Tomorrow we are approved."

And the magistrate whispered nothing, for he did not pray; he planned.

And the boundary-keeper whispered, "Tomorrow we are clean."

And the Split One whispered, "Tomorrow I will know which is true."

And when he said it, his voice broke, and he began to weep, and the weeping became silent shaking.

And the seventh watched him and thought, \*Tomorrow does not answer the split. It only forces it.\*

And the seventh turned his face to the stars and whispered, "If Thou art God, be different than this."

And the stars did not answer.

And the mountain remained dry.

And it was the only Spring.

And thus ended the eighth day.

And it came to pass that in the morning they rose toward the crown again, and the air was thin, and the desire for proof was thick among them. And the seventh felt within himself that the summit would not answer as men expected; for the mountain had already spoken, and the proof was already written in the stranded. And thus they went to the Spring—not knowing that the Spring was not the evidence, but the mirror.

## **THE PROOF**

The Summit v2

Of the Spring, and the True Evidence

And it came to pass that many reached the crown and drank, and the drinking made them feel clean. And they filled their pouches until the leather was heavy, and they smiled, and they called the feeling holiness.

And when they drank, their cheeks flushed, and the lines upon their faces softened, and their hands steadied. And they looked one upon another and said, "Behold—Living Water."

And they healed themselves first, and called it stewardship.

Yet the glow did not remain forever, and men returned for more; and thus the market fed upon miracles.

And some whispered, "Now we are near God," and they loved the height more than the hungry.

And they called the water living proof, because it was living in their mouths, and proof in their hands.

For a little from excess would have been enough; but they preferred proof that could be lifted.

Yet all about the spring there sat men and women with broken pouches, with twisted ankles, with lips split by thirst—stranded beside the only mercy on the mountain. And the trophy-bearers looked away, for to look is to be asked. And they said, “We cannot return empty.” And they said, “If we pour now, we will have none later.” And they said, “The Lord walketh the mountain; He will gather them.” And thus they baptized their hoarding in faith.

And some had already sold the water in their minds before it touched their lips, setting its price in the market while the stranded still sat beside the Spring.

And one said, “Perhaps water is too common for true proof. Perhaps the hidden grail lieth deeper.” And thus a clever thought became a license.

And they said, “We have only enough. We must return with proof.” And they descended with excess and called it stewardship.

But among them there was one man who had been ashamed his whole life, and he was not used to authority, and he had been left wanting. And when he drank, the water cooled his throat, but it did not fill his soul. For he saw that the clean feeling was private, and the stranded were public; and he knew that a God who asks for trophies is not God.

And he said aloud, “If this is holiness, I refuse it.”

And the trophy-bearers called him unworthy.

But the stranded looked upon him as men look upon a door.

And it came to pass that the man began to pour, not once, but many times. He gave a mouthful to one whose pouch had torn. He gave to one whose ankle had broken. He gave to one who had wandered and returned delirious. He gave to a woman who had carried her child until her knees failed.

And as he gave, his own portion fell.

And the others said, “Thou wilt die.”

And he said, “Then let me die refusing a lie.”

And thus the man gathered proof—not in a pouch, but in lives.

For each one he saved rose and walked with him, leaning upon him and upon one another, and the descent became a procession of the rescued.

The Descent v2

Of the Pattern, and the Empty Pouch

And it came to pass that as the procession turned downward, the mountain set before them a living question, that the math might become flesh.

For upon a narrow turn where the trail ran under a leaning wall, there sat a young man with his back to stone, and his hands were wrapped in rags dark with blood. And beside him lay a pouch split along its seam, so that though the Spring was above, he could hold no mercy. And his eyes were wide, not with malice, but with the terror of a man who hath counted his mouthfuls and found the number too small.

And when the seventh said, “Rise. Walk with us,” the young man shook his head and whispered, “If I go down with you, I go down as failure. I must find my own proof.” And the seventh answered, “Thy proof is not above thee. It is beside thee.”

And when he saw the trophy-bearers with full pouches, he lifted his head and said, “Sirs—have ye water?”

And he said, “Not only a mouthful, but a way down. For I have reached high, and I cannot return. If I descend empty, I will die—and if I descend as rescued, I will be scorned.”

Now the trophy-bearers did not stop. And they said, “Endure,” and “Hasten,” and “Thy failure is thine,” and they passed him as men pass a stone upon the road, for they feared that to stop would make them debtors.

But the seventh—he whose heart had already broken—stopped. And the rescued behind him slowed also, for living proof cannot run like thieves; it must walk with what it carries.

And the young man said, “I climbed for proof. I thought it was at the top—until my pouch tore. Now if I go down without water, I will die upon the stones, and they will call it worthiness.”

And he thought also, If I return with Living Water, perhaps a gatekeeper will soften, and the market will call me blessed.

Now when he said worthiness, the seventh felt the old poison in the word. For he heard in it the same lash that had driven him upward. And he looked upon the young man and saw not a stranger, but a mirror—one more soul caught in the same misread command.

And the seventh unstopped his pouch.

Then one of the trophy-bearers, seeing him, turned back and cried, “Thou spendest thy life for fools! If thou pour, thou wilt not make it. And if thou dost not make it, then thou wilt return with shame.”

And the seventh answered, “If shame is the price of saving, then shame is cheap.”

And he poured a mouthful into the young man’s cup. And the young man drank, and his throat moved, and color returned a little to his lips. And the seventh poured again, not because he felt holy, but because the mountain does not care for feelings—only for lives.

And when he had poured, the seventh did not leave the young man sitting. For a mouthful without companionship is only delay. Therefore he placed the young man’s arm upon his shoulder and said, “Rise. Walk with us.”

And the young man whispered, “I am unworthy.”

And the seventh said, “So was I, if worthiness meaneth trophies. But the Lord asked for living proof. And living proof is a life carried down.”

And thus the procession grew by one more soul. And the trophy-bearers, seeing it, hastened their steps, for they desired to reach the gate before the proof could accuse them. Yet the mountain kept account, and their haste did not erase their passing-by.

And the seventh felt his pouch grow lighter, and his tongue grow drier; yet his path grew straighter. For he perceived again the law: if each would give but a little from excess, none would be stranded. But because many would give nothing, one must give all.

And it came to pass that as they descended, they met more stranded; for the mountain was full of those who had climbed for trophies and found only thirst.

And the man saved them also.

And each time he saved one, the cost rose. For sandals delayed becomes rescue, and rescue becomes sacrifice. Yet he did not stop, for he had seen the Lord's command at last: that proof is fruit, not feeling.

And the trophy-bearers passed by the stranded and said, "Endure." And they kept their excess. And they came down praised.

But the man came down empty.

And at the last, near the tree line, his tongue swelled, and his sight dimmed, and his knees failed. And the rescued begged him to drink their portions; but their portions were small, for he had saved many with them.

And the man whispered, "Do not become thrones in my name."

And he fell, and he died of thirst, and his face was peaceful; for he had ceased to chase the clean feeling and had found the living pattern.

And the rescued wept.

The House v2

Of the Lord Who Carries

And it came to pass that the trophy-bearers came to the House of the Lord with full pouches, and they lifted them up as proof. And the people praised them, saying, "Behold their strength. Behold their worthiness."

They sold holiness by the drop, and called the bottle proof.

And the trophy-bearers said unto the Lord, "We have endured. We have climbed. We have brought water."

And they lifted up the Living Water, and the blue shone in the light of the gate, and they said, "We have brought the Grail Water. We have brought enough. Now let us in."

And they said, "We bring Thee what Thou usest."

And the Lord looked upon their pouches and did not rejoice. And He said unto them, "Where are the ones you left upon My mountain?"

And the Lord said unto them, "Water is for the living. Go, and give it to the living. I am now here for the dead. For I asked you to carry, not to bottle."

And one among them—who had been split in his mind, and half-mad with counting and shame—fell down and cried, "Lord, must a man die and give all to be invited into Thy House?"

And the Lord answered him, "No. If all would give what they have in common, there would be none stranded upon this mountain. No death would be required, and all would be welcome in My home.

I did not ask thee to save them all. But thou didst not even save one.

Thou hast justified hoarding, and thou hast returned with the miracle instead of doing My work—distributing what thou couldst.

I need not the water that ye bring to buy entrance. I need you to lift burdens where you can.

And if thou savest one and stoppest, thou hast only tasted mercy, and hast not become it.

For mercy is not a tally, but a way.

It is better that you should live in My work than die in it. Therefore lift where you can, again and again, until thy days are full—and when thou canst lift no more, then rest in My House.

My House is for My laborers to find rest. If thou art done with the labor and art intent on building a throne unto thyself at any point in time, thou art no longer in need of My House, for thou art building thine own.

I do not condemn stewardship; a man must keep tools to labor, and bread to return again.

But keep not abundance as a witness against the hungry.

By “common,” I mean the burdens that are common: hunger, thirst, cold, injury, loneliness—these I have commanded you to lift.

A rope kept for tomorrow is wisdom; a rope kept while a man dies today is sin.

Keep what maketh thee able to carry again. Pour out what thou hast made into proof.

But when thy storehouse becomes a throne, and thy abundance becomes an excuse, thou hast left My way.

But because many ration holiness and barter it for sale, and pass by the least among them, the burden fell upon one. And he gave his life to carry the least unto Me—not because I demanded death, but because you demanded proof and would not carry it.

I asked for living proof, and for you to do even as I have done.”

For proof was not a trophy to be carried once, but a life to be lived daily.

And the Lord stretched forth His hands, and showed them the marks of the nails.

It is better that you should live in My work than die in it. Yet if many would lift the cross, none would die beneath it. His act was holy because he chose it, and because he returned with nothing and received scorn—and I lifted him.

And the Lord said, “You have called mercy a department, and holiness a substance. Yet I asked for living proof, not for theories; and I asked you to do as I do, not to appoint another. For if you will not give what you have in common, you will always need one man to give all—and you will call his death unfortunate instead of preventable.”

He who appointeth another to bear the work and to make the sacrifice taketh upon him the sin of Cain, who would call his brother’s sacrifice his own.

For My House is not a prize for the rare, but a rest for the merciful.

And the Lord said also unto them: “If ye had but given a little—each from his excess—then all might have been saved, and none would have suffered or died. For I asked not for trophies, but for a people. And ye chose praise over mercy, and excess over brotherhood.”

And they answered with stories. And they answered with doctrine. And they answered with fear. And they answered with scorn.

But the Lord did not debate them; for debate is for men. And the Lord stepped past them and went unto the dead man who lay at the gate.

And the Lord stooped, and He lifted the dead man as a shepherd lifteth a lamb, and the Lord carried him into His House.

And the Lord said unto the rescued, even those whose ankles had broken, and those whose pouches had torn, and those who had been lost in storm, “Come in,

and witness.”

And the first said, “I was the one whose pouch tore at the summit, and I could not carry mercy.”

And the second said, “I was the one whose ankle broke upon the ledge, and I lay in the cold.”

And the third said, “I was the one lost in storm, and my mouth was dust.”

And the fourth said, “I was the mother whose child could not breathe, and I had no water.”

And they said together, “And he gave, and we lived.”

And another said, “I was the one whose pouch tore beneath the leaning wall, and he set my arm upon his shoulder, and I walked.”

And the rescued entered, and they saw the dead man’s eyes open, and breath return, and strength fill his limbs; and the Lord healed him, not because he had brought water, but because he had become water.

And the trophy-bearers cried, “Lord, Lord!”

For ye passed by when the proof sat bleeding at the turn, and ye called haste wisdom.

You sought My House by climbing, but you never sought Me by carrying.

For the mountain-top was never My dwelling—only your altar.

For My mercy is not a substitute for yours; it is the pattern you were commanded to become.

But the Lord turned them away, and His voice was plain, and He said, “I never knew you.”

For He knew not pouches lifted as proof, but lives lifted from the dust.

And a proverb went among them, saying:

He that rejecteth me as a prize, findeth me; and he that findeth me as a prize, rejecteth me.